CHIRON RISING

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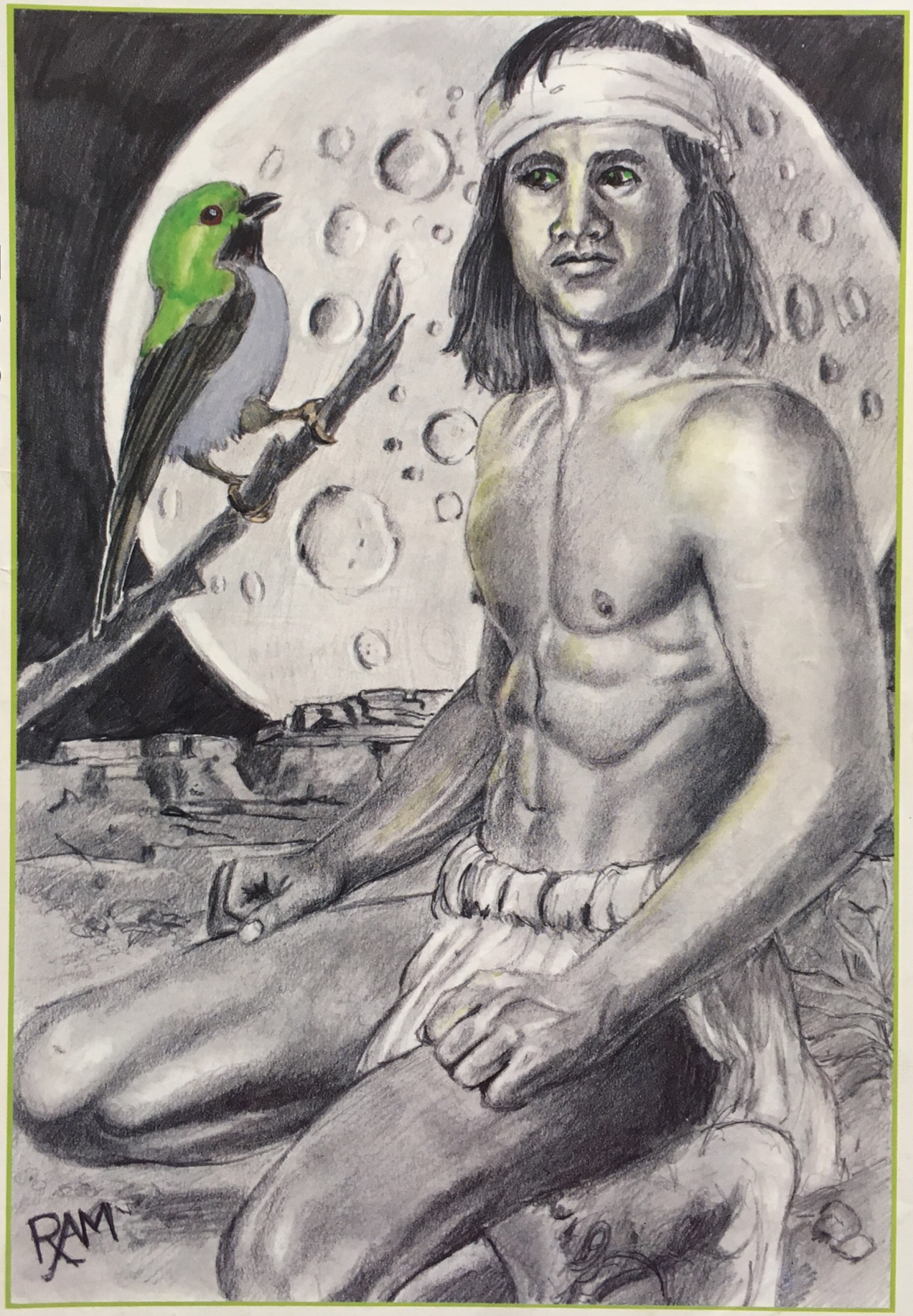
THE MOONFINCH SPECIAL



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GREETINGS

Welcome to our third special issue featuring a full length novel written by yours truly. This one has quite a strange history. I first began working on the short story version in Chicago back in 1979. The story took place in a small, predominantly homosexual western town in 1880 and centered around a bisexual bully who had dreams of luring cattle drivers to the town by turning his saloon into a whore house. Eventually trashing the short story, I began working on the premise again five years later in Houston. But this time I decided to transform the idea into a play set in Utah in 2007. Since I didn't know beans about how to write a play, I studied several classics in the library and spent eight hours a day for two months writing MOONFINCH, the play. Unfortunately, it was not well received. Agents and theatre directors alike sent it back with very unkind comments like, "This is a goddamned screenplay," and "Who are all these characters and what in holy hell are they doing?" One gentle soul advised that the play was written in the wrong format. Everything was wrong.

In 1987, I dusted off the play and decided to turn it into a novel, called SILVERFINCH. By 1988, I had landed an agent and in May 1989, I sold it to a publisher. Again, misfortune reared its ugly head and I cancelled my contract over artistic differences and my publisher's insistence upon my re-writing it a third time. Finally I sent the novel to our very own VIKING for his opinion. Incredibly, he conned me into doing a major re-write and sent me TEN books on style, grammar, structure, clichés, idioms and God knows what. The message: "Read these before you re-write." That done, I renamed the novel and decided to self-publish.

MOONFINCH is probably the most controversial and bizarre of all my works, and I agonized over featuring it in this issue. I expect flack from some sources over the way I've drawn some of my gay characters. Novelists, screenwriters, producers and directors are routinely criticized for depicting gays as anything other than openly gay heroes. The most vociferous watchdog group, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), insists that Hollywood is responsible for gay/lesbian bashing by portraying gay and lesbian film characters as "sissies and victims, or murderers and twisted villains." They point to the serial killer in SILENCE OF THE LAMBS and the crime boss in DARKMAN as examples of twisted gay villains. They go on to condemn WILD AT HEART (they used the "F" word), Q & A (two gay men are murdered) and BIRD ON A WIRE (gay hairdressers as swishing stereotypes). They even condemn scripts that haven't been made into movies yet. And have you heard all the stink about the two gay characters portrayed in Fox's IN LIVING COLOR? Every gay newsmagazine I've read since the series started panned the wildly popular segment because the characters were swishing stereotypes (sorry, but I thought they were funny, very clever and quite familiar).

Gay book publishers and theatre groups also tend to go overboard. One of my plays was turned down because it was "sexist, racist and homophobic"(a *character* in the play *pretended* to be sexist and racist, but I'll be damned if I could figure out the homophobia angle). A novel was turned down because it was "homophobic" and "unrealistic"(a senior character who is irritated by gay militants is seduced by a younger man). Is it gay censorship? What else could it be?

Well here is one author who will not be intimidated by attempts at censorship by the activist, politically correct, openly gay mainstream. The following novel is therefore dedicated to those open-minded, sexually evolved CHIRON RISING readers who are hungry for something unique and provocative.

And while you're reading this one, I'll be busy polishing yet another novel called ZONES. It's about a sexually ambivalent homicide detective who is a 60-year-old version of the late Rocky Marciano, with a little of Ed Asner's Lou Grant thrown in for good measure. It came close to being published, but close isn't good enough. I quote an (name withheld) Publications letter of September 22, 1988 to my agent:

"ZONES is, without a doubt, a compelling and gripping murder mystery. I think Mr. Colley does an admirable job of arousing and holding the reader's interest. We asked several outside readers to take a look at the manuscript, and they all agreed that ZONES was an interesting and enjoyable novel. I'm afraid we've decided, however, that we really cannot accept it for publication. Our publishing schedule is full for some time to come, and at this point we're considering only a very few manuscripts. This one just isn't quite suitable for our needs right now."

If the novel was rejected because of a full schedule, then why the *several outside* readers? I wonder if it could have been the age of the protagonist that scared them off? But no crying over spilled milk. The novel is set for its fourth major rewrite and will go far, far beyond being merely "compelling and gripping." You want a serial killer novel which will scare the holy hell out of you? You want honestly drawn, sexually diverse heros? You got it . . . coming in November 91.

But enough of the future. Time for the present and MOONFINCH. So please fasten your seat belts and get ready for a bumpy ride. We highly recommend that you keep handy a supply of smelling salts, motion sickness pills, paper towels and nitroglycerine pills.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

MOONFINCH

A NOVEL BY PATRICK H. COLLEY

I

ALVARO ENTERS HELL

1

New York, August 1997.

The smell of rancid garbage invaded Alvaro's cocaine-chafed nostrils, drawing his gaze to overflowing cans of refuse at the curb nearby. Nauseated, he walked further up Third Avenue, past three other male prostitutes. Finding the right spot, he leaned against a graffiti-marred brick wall next to an alley entrance.

An illuminated sign in the window of an adjacent store brightened Alvaro's face with flattering hues, highlighting his good looks and dark amber skin. The sultry night caused him to sweat heavily; his arms and hairless chest glistened with moisture. The green tank top clung to his torso and took on the color of chrome tourmaline as it soaked up the perspiration. The setting was right for hot sex, money for more drugs, oblivion. Pleased with the new location, he stroked his cock, coaxing it to swell.

A familiar luxury car passed by a second time, prompting Alvaro to lick his lips and nod. Confident that the grey-haired driver would stop the next time around, he moved to the curb, glancing warily at his competition down the street.

The staccato of automatic rifle fire came from only blocks away. Perpetual sounds of sirens waxed and waned. A shuffling noise came from the alley, diverting his attention. Always vigilant while working the streets, he scanned the badly lit alley, vividly remembering his last beating by skinheads.

Flashing blue police lights reflected off the store front, and Alvaro coiled to flee. He looked toward the first prostitute and saw that an armored police van had turned the corner. It was cruising slowly past them, its beefy driver glowering at each hustler in turn. As the van reached Alvaro, a rifle barrel appeared over the driver's shoulder. A tiny red light appeared and Alvaro realized that the cop on the passenger side was pointing a laser-sighted assault rifle at his head. Terrified, Alvaro dodged away from the van as the two cops laughed. Suddenly, another burst of gunfire came from the East River nearby and the police van sped away, its siren wailing.

His courage wearing thin, Alvaro flinched as someone inside the alley staggered toward him and stood weaving in the shadows. It was a familiar silhouette.

At the same time, Alvaro heard the sounds of an approaching line of cars and anxiously looked back toward the corner for the luxury car.

"Qué tal, cabron?" A raspy voice from the shadows. "You're as nervous as a cat, man. Your head's going back and forth." A giggle.

Exasperated, Alvaro turned again and watched a thin black man with bleached hair emerge from the shadows. "Hey, Paco." *Not now,* he thought. *Get rid of him.* "Uhh . . . I'm about to score with a grey, Paco. I'll catch you here in about twenty minutes, okay?"

Paco shrugged and clumsily sat down on the curb. "Sure."

Alvaro saw that there was something different about Paco. "Hey, man, what'd you get hold of? Got some more?"

"I'll be back in twenty minutes." Paco laughed and leaned back against the sidewalk.

"Seriously," prodded Alvaro. "I ain't ever seen you that stoned, man. What is it?" Again he looked down the street, just as the luxury car rounded the corner.

"Ozone," Paco crooned, rolling his eyes upward. "Best fucking ozone I ever had, man."

Alvaro had heard of the potent, new drug, but he'd never bought any. "I gotta have some of that, Paco," said Alvaro, keeping the car in his peripheral vision.

Abruptly, the car sped across to the other side of the avenue, stopping in front of a young man in biker clothing.

"Sonofabitch!" Alvaro spat.

"This is going to blow your mind, Alvaro," said Paco, getting the taller man's attention again. "The shit's free, man. Fucking *free*."

Alvaro quickly forgot about the lost trick.

"Okay, what's the catch?"

"I just got back from Maxwell's place, man." He stuck his little finger into a small vial and coated the inside of his nose with a brown, honey-like substance.

"Shit, I owe that cocksucker money. He's looking for my ass." Alvaro fought the urge to grab the vial and run.

"I didn't see Maxwell. This weird dude's filling in for him. I think he's Israeli or something. While I was there, he let two other black guys in, gave us all a hit plus one for the road. Yum-yum." He fluttered his tongue. " It knocked us out, man. Hell, we got wasted for about thirty fuckin' minutes. But on our way out, he turned away a couple of white skinheads. And they were Maxwell's regular customers, too. Cocksuckers tried to get tough, and the Israeli busted one of 'em's nose with a fuckin' Uzi nine mil piece. I thought he was gonna blow the fucker's head off."

"Likes dark meat, huh?" asked Alvaro, his mouth watering in anticipation of the drug.

"No, he didn't fuck with us, man." Paco's eyes were becoming glassy and less functional. "At least I don't think he did. Funny, though . . . my arm . . . my arm is sore."

"What's the catch? Ozone's expensive as hell." Alvaro searched Paco's dilating pupils. "Earth to Paco, come in . . . ." He tried to pry the ozone out of Paco's hand, but the small man's fingers were locked.

After dragging Paco into the relative safety of the alley, Alvaro rushed the five blocks to Maxwell's apartment building on 77th Street.

Finding the elevator broken, he ran up the litter-strewn stairway to the third floor apartment. A formaldehyde-like odor in the hallway caused him to gag, prompting him to cover his nose with the bottom of his shirt. Afraid that Maxwell might be there, he listened for voices. Hearing nothing but the sound of a television set, he gently knocked.

A stocky man with dark brown eyes opened the door. "Yes?" He wore an expensive suit and a dazzling diamond and ruby ring. His hands appeared professionally manicured, and his greying, receding hair and beard were cut short. The fragrance of an exotic, spicy-sweet after-shave wafted from the man's face, reminding Alvaro of the fragrance worn by a brawny Turkish military attaché he'd blown in the back of a limousine the week before.

"Uhh . . . where's Maxwell?" Alvaro was amazed that "Maggot Maxwell" could know such a clean-cut, attractive man.

"Out. What do you need?" the man asked with a slight Middle East accent. His eyes sparkled with friendliness.

Alvaro surveyed the room behind the man. A television set was tuned to the news, and a telephone on the bar was off the hook. "Ozone? You got ozone?"

The man opened the door all the way and gestured for Alvaro to enter. "Have a seat and I'll be right with you."

Alvaro sat on a mildewed couch, cringing at the sight of cockroaches crawling on the wall behind the television set. The apartment was repressively dank; the horrible smell inside the apartment was worse than that in the hallway. Ignoring the insects and filth, he studied the man as he spoke on the telephone in a rapid foreign language. Alvaro assumed that he was speaking either Arabic or Hebrew.

The man's presence in Maxwell's apartment seemed so very strange to Alvaro. Maxwell, a deranged chemist who manufactured his own methamphetamine and distributed Bolivian cocaine, had no friends or partners. Because of his body odor, it was obvious that he never took a bath, and his mouth always reeked of advanced gum disease. His apartment was infested with mice, rats and millions of insects. It was no place for a sexy, well-heeled business type from the Middle East.

The sound of the television reached his senses, luring his attention to the screen. Three men in conservative suits and ties sat behind a half-moon desk. The camera panned in tight on the anchor man.

"In Los Angeles today, police say there are no leads in the terrorist car-bombing that killed seventy-three people . . ."

A film clip featured a section of downtown Los Angeles. Pieces of twisted automobile wreckage and body parts lay near a car-length-wide crater, still simmering from the intense heat. Ambulance and fire truck sirens screamed and combined with squalls from the injured to create bizarre harmonics. A lingering close-up showed a severed foot still inside a shoe, followed by a shot of a mute woman being led away by a paramedic, her hands charred, her head void of hair or facial features.

". . . and injured over one hundred thirty. An anonymous caller stated that *Esfahan*, the terrorist group sponsored by the Union of Islamic Republics was responsible. Also in Los Angeles, four hundred ninety more reputed gang members were rounded up by army troops and transferred to Mojave Desert internment camps after a total of sixteen law enforcement personnel were slain last week."

An aerial tracking shot followed a caravan of prisoner busses as they arrived at an undisclosed checkpoint in the vast desert.

"Authorities believe that the murders were in retaliation for a police raid last month which resulted in the confiscation of a fourteen thousand pound shipment of Mexican ozone. That raid left twenty-

one gang members and seven Los Angeles policemen dead."

The camera scanned a long line of men and women with flat, lifeless expressions. Many were emaciated, barely able to stand. Others lay on the sidewalk, unable to move. Swarms of flies collected around pools of urine dotted with feces.

"Here in New York, city VD clinics are plagued with long lines of black, Hispanic and homosexual victims of the incurable, deadly strain of syphilis called Cythrax, the number one killer of minorities in this country. City spokesman Doctor Cyril Peakson reports that the only FDA approved treatment—Quincunx Pharmaceutical's controversial and very expensive new drug, 'Doplique'—is being administered free under a temporary, city-financed program. Unfortunately, the program is slated to be withdrawn in two weeks for lack of matching funds from the state. Bill?" the anchorman prompted, looking at the man to his left.

Hearing a pause in the telephone conversation, Alvaro turned and noticed that the stocky man was surveying him thoroughly. Eventually meeting Alvaro's gaze, he briefly smiled and resumed the conversation.

In spite of a sexual attraction to the man and his own need for a hit of ozone, Alvaro began to feel agitated. He felt a sense of dread, an urge to leave quickly. But instead of following his instincts, he resumed watching the news program, now featuring the co-anchor.

"And, after we return, we'll take you on a tour of Miami, where housing shortages have forced residents to share their homes with other families in twelve-hour shifts. Then we'll take another look at the current war on rats here in Manhattan. And we'll also update our report of last week on the mystery of the disappearance of thousands of homosexuals, i.v. drug users and street people. Gay leaders ask: 'Does anyone really care?'" He smiled slightly and added, softly, "We'll be back after this."

The stocky man suddenly laughed, then slapped his knee, absently scratching his groin.

Alvaro studied the man's crotch and noticed a well-defined bulge. His eyes traced the outlines of two large testicles, one lower than the other, pressed against the man's right thigh. Arcing over the balls was the impression of a short, fat penis. Again, Alvaro caught a whiff of the only pleasant fragrance in the room and allowed himself the fantasy of obtaining a weeks supply of ozone in return for taking this awesomely masculine man to a clean hotel room and feasting on him through the night. As a smile formed on Alvaro's lips, the stocky man groped himself with a wide, hairy hand, thickening the higher impression. Alvaro's gaze met the man's dark eyes as they took him in. *He's game,* thought Alvaro. *He wants his cock sucked.*

The man ended his telephone conversation abruptly, hanging up the receiver. He stood and held out his hand. "My name's Sid. What's yours?"

"Alvaro." He shook Sid's hand. *A Jew . . . here?*

"What's your pleasure, Alvaro?" Sid turned off the television, then stood before Alvaro, his legs spread apart. He groped himself again.

Alvaro stared brazenly at Sid's crotch, licking his lips. The thought of sucking Sid's cock brought a rise to his for-hire cock, but the thought of the approaching ecstasy from the drug made him shudder. "Ozone," he whispered, reaching for Sid's zipper and drawing it down.

Sid inched closer, welcoming Alvaro's hand. "Ozone, huh? You like ozone?"

"Yeah." Alvaro took the dark, uncircumcised cock into his mouth. *Not Jewish, huh? Another Turk? But with a name like Sid?*

"You look like a really hot guy," said Sid, gently grinding his cock into Alvaro's mouth. "You have lots of sex?"

Alvaro fell to his knees and began sucking Sid's cock in earnest. He tried to block out all the apartment's offensiveness and imagined frolicking with Sid inside a huge, glass-walled shower.

"How many guys do you have sex with in an average day?"

Sid's unusual questions soon caught Alvaro's attention. "Six, eight . . . sometimes none. I don't know." He hungrily sucked the short, thick cock back into his mouth.

Sid pumped Alvaro's face, cupping the back of the young man's head with his hands. "Oh, shit. You like cock, don't you?"

Alvaro moaned in response.

The pumping became stronger as Sid ran his fingers through Alvaro's hair, pulling it slightly. "Suck my cock, you cocksucker," he hissed. "Suck it. Bite it a little."

Alvaro carefully chewed the thick penis shaft, protecting the sensitive head with his tongue.

"Oh, shit!" Sid inched closer, burying his cock into Alvaro's throat. "I'm going to pop," he warned. "I'm going to pop. I'm . . . Ahh!"

Alvaro felt the throbbing of Sid's cock and tasted the slightly sweet jissom filling his mouth.

The stocky man shuddered and backed away, a strange look passing over his face, then fading to a pleasant smile. Residue from his ejaculation dripped to the floor and he reached for a handkerchief. "Ozone, coming up." He wiped his cock dry, then stuffed it back inside his trousers. The odd expression returned just before he turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

Alvaro swallowed the semen, something he

rarely did. The sense of the sweet aftertaste seemed to mix in his brain with that of the after-shave, creating a retrievable, erotic cocoon—something to hide inside the next time a repulsive "john" insisted upon a blowjob.

Sid returned, holding a small bottle to the light for inspection.

Alvaro wondered if it was really free like Paco had said. "I'm short of funds, man," said Alvaro, his mouth watering at the sight of the bottle. "Maxwell usually lets me . . . ."

Sid extended the bottle. "No problem. Your talented mouth more than paid for it."

Alvaro quickly opened it and stuck his finger inside. He smeared his nostrils with a thick, tan liquid, sniffing it up into his sinuses. He smiled and ceased shaking. A minute later, he became glassy-eyed and leaned back, a grin on his face. He dreamily watched as Sid's expression changed drastically.

A rap came to the door, but Sid ignored it. Instead, he retrieved a briefcase from the kitchen and returned to the couch. He took out latex gloves and a surgical mask. After putting them on, he pulled out a syringe and an insulated carrying case normally used for insulin. Beads of sweat began to collect on his forehead. His hands trembled. Carefully, he opened the case to reveal an injectable vial of light green liquid. Taking several deep breaths as if to calm himself, he lifted the vial out of the case and injected it with 50 units of air, drawing out the same quantity of the green liquid. He balanced the syringe on the couch, then gently returned the vial to the insulated case, sighing after it was secure again. Chanting what seemed like a prayer, he held up the syringe in front of his eyes. Entranced, he firmly pinched a section of Alvaro's deltoid muscle and injected the liquid.

It occurred to Alvaro that he should protest, but he couldn't move. "Wha-wazat, man?" he slurred.

In a low timbre, Sid said, "May the wrath of Allah go with you. May your seed bring many white demons to their knees. I am Siddiqqi, exterminating angel of God."

"You're Arab . . . Arabic . . . ." Alvaro tried to focus on the tiny puncture wound in his arm.

Discarding the syringe on the floor, Siddiqqi placed the mask and gloves inside the briefcase, then swiftly left the apartment.

Alvaro's initial rush was soon replaced by a feeling of omnipotence, and his paralysis ebbed. He struggled to his feet and staggered to the window. Unable to open it, he shattered it with a lamp, sending shards of glass onto the dark sidewalk. He peered down and tried to focus on Siddiqqi, who glanced back at him. "What . . . did you *give* me, motherfucker!"

Siddiqqi disappeared into the shadows.

Hoping to find more drugs, Alvaro tottered into the kitchen, almost falling over Maxwell's body. The pusher had been shot through the neck and lay in a pool of coagulated blood.

Alvaro shook his head, trying to think clearly. "Oh, shit. Gotta get out of here." He ran out of the apartment and down the stairs to the street. He listened for the Arab's footsteps but heard only distant car horns and the muted wailing of a child. *That shit was green*, he thought. *What was that stuff?* He reached inside his pocket for the bottle of ozone and, dodging into an alley, smeared a small amount inside his nostrils. Suddenly, the green liquid was forgotten as he felt a sweet rush unmatched by any other drug. His feet seemed to float above the pavement.

A flood of disjointed childhood memories crowded his mind. It was as if he had regressed back to his childhood, a time when no one could have predicted such a terrible fall for Alvaro Sanchez. Bright, strong, good-looking and considerate, he was born into a hard working, Catholic family in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico. His mother had assumed early on that Alvaro would be no problem—he'd surely marry a local girl, realize his childhood dream of becoming a policeman, and produce a nice family. But when Alvaro reached his mid-teens, he began to sense a sexual attraction toward older men. One day while in Old San Juan, he spotted an especially muscular, middle-aged man browsing through a magazine rack. The attraction was intense; he felt an acute anxiety so powerful that he became nauseated. Unable to control his compulsion, he followed the man into a public toilet and watched him urinate. Feeling a frightening sensation in his groin, he rushed to a booth, just in time to unleash his first climax into the bowl. Although he masturbated to fantasies of older men from that day on, it was not until much later that he consummated his sexuality.

Suppressing the disturbing thoughts of his mother and family, he washed his cock and balls in a restaurant toilet and began working Third Avenue again. After ten minutes, a sleek new BMW with diplomatic tags stopped at the curb. The driver, a blond with ice-blue eyes, gauged him, then gestured for him to enter the car. Alvaro climbed inside and named his price, whereupon the driver nodded and drove to a dark spot near the East River. Without saying a word, the man reached over and pulled at Alvaro's zipper. Alvaro smiled and pushed the well-manicured hand away. He unzipped his trousers and pulled out his flaccid cock.

As the man hungrily sucked his cock, Alvaro sought one of his erotic cocoons. He locked onto one of his cherished memories of those rare occasions

when he had sex with older, brawny men. Soon, he found himself luxuriating in a vivid fantasy. He looked down and saw a greying, stocky man licking his cock head and moaning a plea for Alvaro to climax. The man's massive, rough hands fondled Alvaro's churning testicles.

As Alvaro climaxed, his fantasy evaporated, leaving him repulsed at the sight of his trick, taking him with relish. Moreover, he felt an odd anxiety, as if he'd somehow doomed the young man. Shuddering, he watched the man frown and frantically spit out the window, as if he had just tasted something foul.

By two in the morning, Alvaro had tricked with seven men with little regard to size or color, earning nearly $900. His arm hurt at the spot of his injection; he felt miffed that all of his tricks had found his jissom foul-tasting. Exhausted, he took the subway to the Bronx and walked up six flights to a small, one bedroom apartment he shared with two female Puerto Rican prostitutes. He was startled at the sight of his roommates sitting stiffly on a couch, terror etched in their eyes.

"Wha—" he began, then whirled as he heard the door slam behind him.

Two vicious-looking men moved toward him.

"Alvaro Sanchez?" asked the man on his right, his voice grating.

"Who the fuck wants to know?" Alvaro said defiantly.

Without warning, the other man sharply kicked him in the groin. As Alvaro yelled, the first man handcuffed him. The women cried out in protest, but the kicker turned and silenced them with a menacing look.

Alvaro continued to wail in pain as the men carried him down the stairs, pummeling him in the stomach and face. They reached the street and threw him into an unmarked van, where he lost consciousness.

2

Alvaro awakened to the rhythmic sound of metal wheels clacking against rails; he felt his body swaying in concert with others near him. He could see nothing and wondered if he'd been blinded. Fighting a creeping panic, he sat up and checked to see if his eyes had been swollen shut. His left eye was swollen, but his right seemed okay. He began to make out dark forms and heard soft moans and sobs. He heard remnants of a hushed conversation between two men to his left:

" . . . never thought they'd do this. "

"It's the Cythrax. They think we're spreading Cythrax."

"It's like the Nazis . . . and they're sending us to ovens."

Later, a man lit a cigarette at the far end of the enclosure, enabling Alvaro to catch a glimpse of his surroundings. He realized that he was inside a boxcar.

"How do you feel?" a thin voice came from behind.

"You talking to me?" asked Alvaro.

"Yeah. We couldn't get your nose to stop bleeding. You were withdrawing from some dope, man, and we had to pin you down."

Alvaro gingerly touched his nose, finding it numb. He moved his fingers to his upper lip but couldn't feel any wetness. "It's numb. They must've broken it."

"Maybe not. I'll take a look later when it gets light."

Alvaro reached back and touched a wiry arm. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

A strong hand squeezed his shoulder. "What's your name?"

"Alvaro. You?"

"Tony."

"I won't forget it, Tony."

"You will when we get to the ovens."

"Ovens?" Alvaro gasped as the reality of it hit him. "Surely they wouldn't . . . " His nose suddenly throbbed in pain.

Then the withdrawal demon arrived and attacked his stomach.

When daylight came, holes in the boxcar offered a dim light; Alvaro saw that Tony was a short, wiry black man. Alvaro watched in amazement as Tony assumed the role of resident nurse, comforting all those who were ill or had been beaten—virtually all of the men on the car. At one point, Tony peered through a small peephole and Alvaro got a good look at his face. It was wet with tears.

It reminded him of a time when he was only seven . . .

Carlito and Alvaro were best friends back in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico. They were inseparable and made a pact to become policemen just as soon as they had turned eighteen. Carlito was the kind of friend who could get a pal to cut school in an instant, or steal bananas off mean old Señor Maldonado's trees. He could talk Alvaro into the most bizarre things. In spite of the fact that Carlito was always in trouble with his parents, he was constantly in a state of motion and glee.

One day he convinced Alvaro that they could hook a large barracuda on a light fishing line wound around a cola can. Using a small starfish as bait and

walking out on the reef with bare feet, Carlito dangled the impaled creature in front of a six-foot barracuda prowling the reef. The barracuda struck the bait with such immense speed and ferocity that the boy was pulled off the reef. Alvaro quickly yanked him out, firmly convinced that only a miracle had saved Carlito from being eaten by the monster fish. From then on, Carlito introduced Alvaro to everyone as "the boy who saved my life."

The following year, Carlito convinced Alvaro that the shed in the back of Señor Maldonado's house was filled with pirate treasures, so they broke into it one morning before sunrise. Señor Maldonado, awakened by the noise, locked them inside the shed and whispered in a menacing voice that it was filled with giant leeches and scorpions. Knowing that screams would bring their parents—along with severe punishment—the boys silently braved the few hours of darkness and horror. When dawn arrived, Carlito peeked out a hole in the wall, enabling Alvaro to see the tears rolling down his cheeks.

Alvaro lay in a fetal position, vomiting up the rancid, cold soup he'd consumed during the train's daily feeding stop. He began to hallucinate the feeling of giant leeches and scorpions crawling over his body.

3

Late in the fifth day, the door of the putrid boxcar was opened much wider than usual. The flat terrain stretched for miles to mountains soaring on the horizon. Alvaro could tell that he was very far from home. Stone-faced soldiers holding automatic rifles watched as Alvaro and thirty-nine others got out of the boxcar. Nine, either dead or unable to move on their own, remained inside. Alvaro and the other prisoners looked on in terror as men in white uniforms, surgical masks and latex gloves threw the dead off the opposite side of the train. Those still alive but unable to get up were shot through the head and dumped atop the other bodies. Hearing shots ring out in the distance, Alvaro saw a great number of boxcars stretching far in both directions. He counted sixty-seven cars. Hundreds of bodies were thrown out by an army of men in white. Hundreds more were shot.

Ordered to march to a group of buildings in the distance, the survivors began walking, their atrophied leg muscles cramping due to lack of blood circulation. A thin young man from a car ahead of them fainted and was immediately shot. Two men in white quickly pulled him away from the column. To combat the pervasive fear, Alvaro and Tony whispered encouragement to the men around them.

After what seemed to be several hours, the long column of men reached a run-down military base which had been converted into a detention center. Painted off-white, it was surrounded by two rows of barbed wire fencing, ten feet high. There were two sentry towers attached to the main buildings, but none above the fencing. The men were led single file into a central building for processing.

Alvaro and Tony stayed close together as they were counted and ushered through various locked, steel-mesh doors. When they heard the order to halt, they were standing in front of a pair of bunk beds inside a dormitory with barred windows. A rolled up mattress, two sheets and a towel were atop each bed. Almost convinced that the worst part was over, they were shocked into reality when an orientation officer entered, accompanied by a guard armed with an automatic rifle.

The officer had a bloated face and cruel eyes. "In order to protect the citizens of this country," he began, reading from a card, "the Federal Government has made provisions to quarantine all persons suspected of being infected with Cythrax. You will be detained here until the epidemic is fully under control and you are found to be free of disease." He smiled strangely, almost smirking. "You will be asked to volunteer from time to time for the testing of new medications and surgical procedures."

Alvaro and Tony looked at one another.

"Those who volunteer," continued the officer, "will be allowed certain privileges."

"To die quick," mumbled someone behind the officer.

The officer and the armed guard turned and coldly surveyed the men on that side before continuing. "You will be given one nutritious meal per day in the evening," he said, " and you will have ample time for recreation in the field outside." He looked menacingly toward where the prisoner had spoken. "Troublemakers will be shot. This is not a Boy Scout camp." He turned a complete circle. "Is that understood?" He pointed to the back of the dormitory. "Each dormitory has a latrine, complete with showers." He looked at his watch. "For the next hour, you can clean up. Then at nineteen hundred hours, you'll be marched to chow. Tomorrow, you'll be outfitted with clothing." With a sadistic twinkle in his eye, he abruptly left, followed by the guard. "Be ready to move out when I get back!" he called over his shoulder. A heavy mesh door closed behind them.

Watching the officer and guard disappear down a long hallway, Alvaro sat on the side of the bed. "A simple blood test could tell if we were infected."

"Right," Tony said softly, joining him. "We're here for another reason."

"What?" Alvaro wondered how Tony knew so much.

Tony laughed. "You haven't heard all the rumors?"

"A few."

"You haven't heard shit, have you?" Tony seemed amazed.

"No, tell me," Alvaro urged, studying Tony for the first time. He was dark-skinned but had Caucasian facial features. In spite of the hard, street-wise edge to his voice, he spoke eloquently.

Tony sighed and crossed his arms. "They want to get rid of us. AIDS, Cythrax, all of it was engineered by the white ruling class. But it didn't work like they planned, so this is the . . . ah . . . "*final* solution," pardon the expression. They kill two birds with one stone, like doing medical experiments for chemical warfare on the healthy ones." He shuddered. "And when we're no longer useful, they exterminate us."

Alvaro shook his head in disbelief and shock. "What if they're telling the truth? Maybe we're just under quarantine."

Tony frowned. "Good God, man. How many fucking bodies did you see out there? You think we're dealing with the Red Cross here?"

Alvaro felt a creeping chill.

"I heard something else, though." Tony smiled. "If it's true, things are going to change in this world. But it won't save *us,* though."

"What?"

"It's sort of a delayed revenge for the ninety-one Gulf War. This microbiologist I dated says that the Islamic Fundamentalists developed a virus that only attacks light-skinned people. The virus is like the flu, but it fills the lungs up really quick. It kills infected people within hours, he said. He swears that squads of terrorists were sent to all the *whitey*-ruled countries—that they fucking *created* virus carriers. Most every light-skinned person the carrier comes in sexual contact with goes down with the disease. It's happening right now, man!"

"Who are the carriers?"

"Blacks, Hispanics, Arabs, Orientals—anyone who has more pigmented skin. They don't get the disease, but they *spread* it. These fuckers put the shit in cigarettes, food, beer . . . and they shot up every junky in sight with it."

Alvaro allowed himself a brief image of Siddiqqi and the green vial, but he quickly wrapped some suppressive mechanism around it, burying it deep within a dark crevasse of his brain. "That sounds a little far-fetched, Tony." He became aware of the vile odor from his body. "Jesus, I need to take a shower."

"Yeah, right," mumbled Tony, making up his bed on top.

Alvaro stripped and grabbed his towel. Walking to the showers, he looked out the windows and watched as front end loaders scooped up bodies alongside the railroad tracks. He began to feel nauseated and hurried into the latrine, rushing under the first available shower. As the spray hit his face and the cacophony of voices rose around him, he privately wept.

4

As the weeks passed, Alvaro and Tony became very close. Still checking on everybody's well-being, Tony managed to hear all the latest rumors and supplied Alvaro with seemingly factual accounts of the engineered epidemic, or the "White Flu," which was crushing the white-dominated governments one by one, bringing them to collapse. Tony insisted that the Chinese had made a pact with the Union of Islamic Republics and both were threatening war with a Europe that was in turmoil, and that civil wars were raging in what was left of the Soviet Union. With fervor, he told anyone who would listen that Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia had all been taken over by leftists with predominantly Indian blood and that the governments of Cuba and Brazil had been removed from power by leftists with predominantly African blood. Moreover, the nine new governments had created what was called the Latin American Alliance and was threatening its own war of revenge against the rapidly deteriorating United States. And since all offensive nuclear weapons had been made obsolete by fail-safe anti-missile technology developed and sold to everyone by Japan, the United States was more vulnerable than at any other time in its history. Tony went so far as to create an underground government in order to take power when the Latin American Alliance liberated them. Alvaro didn't believe any of it but went along with his friend.

During the exercise periods, Tony went from one group to another in the yard, coordinating and comparing notes. Alvaro spent all his free time wandering around the perimeter near the double fence. Resuming a childhood fascination, he began studying birds, sometimes feeding them bread crumbs he'd saved from his single daily meal. Because it was so very disturbing, the vague memory of Siddiqqi and the green liquid finally submerged into the depths of his memory. Eventually he was able to likewise repress the record of the boxcar horror.

One late afternoon, Alvaro sat on the bank of a draw, away from the others, looking out over the rugged terrain. The season was changing and there was a chill in the air. A flock of small birds flew

overhead, prompting Alvaro to wonder where they were heading. Several swooped toward him and perched atop the fence, which was ten or so feet away.

"Hi, guys," he said. "Where're you going? Wanna take me?"

Their high, sweet calls fascinated him, and he could almost imagine becoming one of them. He wondered if the birds had sensed his doom and had come to comfort him.

He had always loved birds. He remembered being taken to see an aunt in Poncé when he was six. Aunt Rosie had an aviary and raised cockatiels, parakeets and finches. The finches had especially entranced him with their vibrant colors and soft, reedy chirps. He could vividly remember the day Aunt Rosie died and how upset he was, worrying about who would take care of her birds.

Suddenly the birds flew away and Alvaro began searching for others. He scanned the desert scrub and focused on what looked like the head of a young Indian, complete with headband and long, black hair, not fifty feet away. Amused at how the late sun could alter things and deceive the eyes, especially through a double fence, he looked up in the sky and watched as four ravens played their own version of tag. But the head intrigued him, and he found it again. He squinted to better focus his eyes, then nodded in greeting, feeling silly.

The young Indian smiled.

Alvaro's mouth dropped; he wondered if he was hallucinating. Gulping to wet his suddenly dry throat, he glanced back to see if the sentries had spotted the Indian, who was fairly well hidden underneath a clump of creosote-like scrub. Sure that they hadn't, he resumed his gaze and discreetly gestured for the young man to back away. *Watch it, man, these goons would just as soon shoot you as look at you.*

The Indian winked and Alvaro smiled, enchanted. "Be careful," Alvaro said softly.

The Indian nodded.

"I wish you could take me with you," Alvaro whispered.

The Indian's expression turned bittersweet. He made a V sign with his fingers and disappeared.

As long shadows streaked across the desert, Alvaro saw the Indian atop a magnificent chestnut stallion, two hundred yards away. The horse was prancing and seemed anxious to run, but the Indian held him back.

Alvaro heard a commotion from behind and turned to see a tower guard pointing at the man on the horse. He heard a rifle shot and watched in horror as the Indian fell to the ground. The horse bolted out of sight into a depression.

"Got him!" shouted one of the sentries.

Within seconds, an off-road vehicle sped into the desert, carrying two soldiers. As the vehicle reached the vicinity of the fall, the Indian suddenly rose and riddled the men with a powerful submachine gun. A barrage of shots rang out from the camp, but the Indian ran down a slope and out of sight. A moment later, he reappeared astride the galloping horse, racing off into the desert.

Alvaro defiantly shoved his fist to the sky and cheered.

5

Sedated with an i.v. dripping fluid into his arm, Alvaro was being pushed down a long hallway on a gurney. The attendant, an Hispanic, seemed to want to tell Alvaro something but later avoided eye contact. Upon reaching a holding room, Alvaro was placed next to another patient, likewise sedated and awaiting surgery. A female nurse with an expressionless face entered the room, injected something into the i.v. line of the other patient and wheeled him out through a double door. She returned with another man, his sheets splattered with blood. Alvaro stared at the bloodstains and wondered if he, too, was about to be butchered.

Soon the Hispanic attendant brought in another patient, and then another.

"What are they going to do?" slurred the patient next to Alvaro.

Alvaro opened his mouth to answer, just as the nurse came in and injected a colorless liquid into his i.v. line. Two orderlies appeared and roughly pushed his gurney through the double door and down a short hallway. Slamming through another double doorway, Alvaro saw two men in bloody green gowns with surgical masks and latex gloves. A third man sat at a console attached to gas cylinders. He felt himself being lifted and placed atop an operating table, just as he lost consciousness.

Alvaro awakened inside a large recovery room filled with patients. Dreamily he looked about the room and noticed that each patient was attached to monitoring equipment at various stations around the ward. His i.v. was still in place, and he felt wires crossing his chest. How ludicrous, he thought, that they would take such precautions here in light of the bloodbath outside. The memory of the boxcars surfaced, nauseating him, followed closely by the big question:

What did they do to me?

He tried to sit up, but a sharp pain in his groin convinced him to lie still. "Oh, God, no," he whispered, becoming more nauseated as he imagined what they might have done to him.

A young man with glasses and moustache

approached him and studied the monitors. His expression was indifferent and clinical.

"What did you do to me?" asked Alvaro weakly.

The man ignored him and motioned to a female nurse nearby. "Lieutenant, let's move this one."

"Yes, Major," said the nurse, quickly disconnecting the wires on Alvaro's chest.

Alvaro studied her eyes and sensed a modicum of concern. "What did they do to me?" he asked, his voice cracking.

The nurse glanced at him and lightly bit her bottom lip. "Please . . . don't talk." She unhooked Alvaro's i.v. from a stand and placed it between his arm and chest.

As the nurse and an orderly rolled him down a long hallway, Alvaro became mesmerized by the blur of light fixtures above.

Arriving at a two-bed room, the nurse and the orderly lifted Alvaro onto a bed and hung his i.v. on a stand. Silently, they left, their expressions grim.

He fell asleep.

Alvaro awakened to a draft around his crotch. He focused on an older, portly man in a white smock lowering his sheet. He wore the insignia of a major.

"How do you feel?" He had recessed salt and pepper hair, a ruddy complexion and hazel eyes.

Alvaro thought he could see compassion in the man's face. "Violated," he answered flatly.

"I can imagine," he mumbled, moving to the other patient.

Alvaro felt a strong attraction to the man, but reprimanded himself. *He's a butcher.* "Butcher," he whispered.

The doctor checked the other young man's pulse, then closed his eyes and sighed. Gently, he covered the man's face with the sheet.

"All in a day's work, huh, Doc?"

The doctor glanced at Alvaro and sat in a chair, pulling a pint of Southern Comfort out of his smock. "I'm not your surgeon, my friend." He looked squarely at Alvaro. "I'm just a washed-up urologist who gets out of this snake pit in two more days." He took a long gulp from the bottle.

Alvaro's attraction surged. "I'm not used to seeing a kind face around this place."

The older man chuckled. "Kind?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Is that how I come across?" His expression became somber. "I feel desolate . . . unclean. I'll always have nightmares about this place." He took another drink.

"What did they do to me?" asked Alvaro, his skin crawling in anticipation.

The urologist hesitated. "They took some things out and replaced them with their bionic counterparts." His voice was almost a whisper. "You don't want to look down there now."

Tears welled in Alvaro's eyes. "But why did they do it?"

The doctor shuddered and finished the pint. "Experimentation. We're in a place called Baxter Flats, Utah and this facility is called the Baxter Flats Urological Research Center. Here they incarcerate male homosexuals to feed the urology mill. The army develops spare parts like synthetic bladders, testicles, prostates, penile implants—stuff to keep our fighting men whole." He saluted. "I could be shot for telling you this."

Alvaro wiped his eyes and smiled. "They won't hear it from me." He sensed that the doctor felt compelled to tell him everything.

"There're other research centers all over the Salt Lake basin, all doing experiments of some sort, all in the name of war. They're connected to camps for lesbians, junkies, gangbangers, derelicts . . . ."

"You got any more booze?" asked Alvaro.

The doctor smiled, apparently eager to have a drinking buddy. "Yeah. I'll be back." He gestured toward the corpse. "Keep him company."

The doctor returned a short time later with a fifth of 100 proof Southern Comfort and two paper cups. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

"What happens if they catch us?" asked Alvaro, eager to consume the alcohol.

The doctor shrugged. His face was flushed and he was well on his way to intoxication. "No one gives a shit. No one mans the nursing station this time of night anyway."

So what happens if someone starts bleeding?" asked Alvaro, knowing the answer.

The doctor poured two cups of liquor and handed one to Alvaro. "Drink it slow or else you'll kill yourself. You still have a lot of anesthesia in your system."

The young Puerto Rican sipped the sweet drink, sighing as the burning liquid raced to his empty stomach. "This will probably knock me for a loop."

The urologist stared into his drink and smiled.

Alvaro wondered what kind of pleasant memory the doctor was retrieving and wished that he could evoke something as pleasing. "Where will you go?"

His attention returned to Alvaro. "Pardon?"

"Where will you go from here?"

The doctor's smile faded. "A field hospital in Arizona, probably. Near the front."

"The front?" Alvaro rolled up his eyes. "So it *is* true."

"Yep. Afraid so." The doctor's gaze was

less steady. "The war finally comes home." He finished his cup and stood, yawning. "All these years and the only ones who even got close was Japan. It had to happen sooner or later." He grabbed the back of the chair to keep his balance. "Well, I guess I'd better hit the sack." He looked into Alvaro's cup and poured him another shot. "Wait another thirty minutes before you drink this, okay?"

"When's the last time you got your rocks off?" Alvaro asked abruptly.

The older man stared at Alvaro, mulling over the question. He shook his head and grinned. "I don't even remember. It's not a very sexy world out there any more." He placed the bottle under his arm. "Why?"

Alvaro turned onto his side, wincing in pain. "I'm not going to get out of here alive, so I thought I'd just be direct. Let me suck your cock, okay?"

A wave of surprise and embarrassment crossed the doctor's face. "I . . . uhh . . . don't think so," he said, staggering through the doorway.

Minutes later, a brawny black man in fatigues entered the room and stuffed the corpse inside a body bag, hefting it onto a gurney. Glancing indifferently at Alvaro, he rolled the young man's body out of the room.

Alvaro slept fitfully and wondered why he never had to urinate. He looked over the side of the bed and saw that he was connected to a urine and blood-filled jar on the floor. For the fourth time, he reached down to feel himself but couldn't go through with it.

As the sky outside turned magenta with the rising sun, the urologist returned. Saying nothing, he sat atop the next bed and gazed at Alvaro with a mixture of lust and revulsion. His decision obviously reached, he slipped off the bed and unzipped his trousers, offering himself.

Alvaro looked up into the doctor's glassy eyes.

"This place makes you crazy. I'm crazy, you're crazy . . . the whole damned world . . . ."

Alvaro took out the semi-erect cock with trembling hands. He inhaled the pubic essence, savoring it. He licked the cock head, tasted the saltiness of a final drop of urine, the residue of a hastily washed penis. Lovingly, he took the doctor's cock into his mouth and felt it harden and pulsate. He closed his eyes in ecstasy as the doctor's strong hands caressed his neck.

As the sweet liquid filled his mouth, Alvaro realized that he'd felt no sensation in his own groin and blocked his mind from pursuing the reasons. Instead, he welcomed the magic of the doctor's hands, the heat from his crotch, the nourishment from his semen. He was being touched lovingly, intimately, and that was all that mattered.

The doctor pulled away, looking warily toward the door.

Alvaro reached out for the older man but fell back as searing pain tore at his groin. "Oh, my God," he whispered through clenched teeth.

The doctor quickly stuffed his dripping penis back inside his trousers and held up the sheet. He inspected Alvaro's groin, then sighed and looked away. "The sutures didn't break. The pain'll subside."

Their eyes met and Alvaro could sense that the doctor was juggling a host of emotions.

"Do you have any idea how much of an angel you really are?" Alvaro held out his hand. "Hold me. Oh, God, please just touch me one more time."

Watching the doorway, the doctor reached for Alvaro's hand, squeezed it, then turned to leave.

"What's your name?" whispered Alvaro.

The doctor paused at the doorway. "Richard," he said. He smiled wanly and left.

The following day, orderlies brought in another patient from surgery. Shortly thereafter, Richard and a nurse entered the room to examine him. While the nurse wasn't looking, Richard glanced at Alvaro and winked.

Alvaro felt an overpowering anxiety. *You're leaving for the front and I'll never see you again. I'm being dismantled piece by piece. Isn't life a bitch?*

The nurse left the room and Richard lingered with the other young man, who was moaning and cursing.

"So when do you leave? Tomorrow?" asked Alvaro.

"Yeah." Richard looked at Alvaro somberly, then walked to his bedside. "I hear that the casualty rate is almost ninety percent."

Alvaro's eyes began to mist over.

Richard appeared concerned. "You hurting? I can get you . . . "

"I'm not hurting that way." Alvaro tried to laugh. "In a way, I hurt, but in another way, I feel very good inside. I never thought I could love anyone . . . but I found that I could. I'm happy about that."

"You telling me that you're in *love* with me?" Richard grinned.

"Yeah . . . Isn't it great?" Alvaro managed to chuckle.

Richard shook his head, then looked at Alvaro thoughtfully. "Any other time, I'd say it was loathsome, but . . . for two doomed men with no future, I'd say it was great, yeah." He heard the footsteps of the returning nurse and turned to leave. "I'll see you tonight."

That night, Richard slipped into the darkened room as Alvaro waited anxiously. The young man in the other bed was asleep. Without saying a word, the doctor slipped his cock into Alvaro's mouth. This time, the portly man seemed more excited. He probed deeply, then shivered and quickly pulled out, as if he wanted to avoid a premature climax. Richard massaged Alvaro's face and ran his fingers through the young man's dark hair. He moaned softly and began to quake. Alvaro counted the throbs: *one... two... three... four... five.* The doctor came and came again, filling Alvaro's mouth with an unforgettable climax.

For the duration of the night, Richard sat at Alvaro's bedside; they whispered their barren life stories to one other.

When the horizon began to lighten, Richard stood. "I have to leave," he whispered.

"I love you, Richard." Alvaro squeezed the doctor's hand. "Regardless of what they do to me, I'll alway think of you for strength and I'll survive. I *will* survive this, Richard."

"You're something else." Richard shook his head in awe.

Alvaro kissed his hand and watched as it slipped from his grasp.

Richard walked to the door and stopped, glancing back. With tears in his eyes, he flashed the V sign and disappeared through the doorway.

II

THE COLONEL AND HIS BOYS

1

December, 1998. Simpson Springs, Utah

Colonel Jack Deegan was the commander of the U.S. Army's Simpson Springs Endocrinological Research Center in northwestern Utah. At 53, he'd grown a moderate layer of fat over his once rippling body but was nowhere near being out of shape. He looked more like a burly ironworker than a neurosurgeon. In spite of a fairly dark complexion (inherited from his Spanish mother) his eyes were either sea green or grey-green, depending on how the light struck them and whether he felt angry or amorous. His voice was soft and low, yet commanding. Early on, he'd realized that he possessed a potent chemistry. So potent, in fact, that many women fell all over themselves vying for his favor. With such an advantage, he became an expert at manipulation. He especially gloated over the realization that most men often bristled with hatred for him because he made them feel insignificant and less masculine. Those men who didn't hate him were obviously gay in his mind, to be used like the women. Nearly everyone deferred to his dominance.

His current assignment was the apex of his career; it made him feel more powerful than ever before. The Simpson Springs facility was charged with developing compounds which triggered various glandular secretions in soldiers. It employed fifty-six scientists, endocrinologists, surgeons and nurses, most of them army officers.

Jack had recently been promoted to full colonel, in part due to his group's development of a ground-clinging mist which rendered enemy troops catatonic with fear. Another breakthrough was a compound which elicited heroism in even the most cowardly soldier. He was proud of these accomplishments, but ashamed of the darker aspects of his job. His staff didn't just "milk" the required glandular secretions from willing patients. Virtually all human ingredients were retrieved through surgery on incarcerated "undesirables," who were shipped to the facility from the various internment camps. But counter to official procedure, Jack directed that "heroic measures" be taken to minimize the death rate of surgical subjects. For that reason, most of his staff truly admired him and helped cover-up his insubordination to his superiors. Moreover, everyone kept quiet about his worst-kept secret: his protection of Major Harwin Mattingly and Captain Bobby Fairchild

Harwin and Bobby were lovers and would have been arrested and shipped to one of the camps if Jack's superiors had found out. In order to maintain the status quo and restrain Bobby from his usual promiscuity, the three men kept to themselves in their spare time, drinking heavily and abusing recreational drugs.

Harwin, a tall, distinguished vascular surgeon, had met Jack while both worked as field surgeons in Nevada at the beginning of the war. During an air raid, Jack had been hit in the stomach by a piece of shrapnel and would have bled to death had it not been for Harwin's rapid repair of a hepatic artery. After that, Jack and Harwin became best friends and it wasn't long before Harwin admitted that he was gay and was pining for his lover, who was assigned to another field hospital in New Mexico. When Jack was promoted to head up the Simpson Springs facility, he used his clout to have both Harwin and Bobby transferred there, reuniting them after a year's separation.

Bobby, a homely, witty man in his thirties, was less haunted by the experimentation than Jack and Harwin. He took it in stride and was more concerned with the myriad drugs which were avail-

able to him. Intensely attracted to Jack, he secretly grew to love him. When he had sex with Harwin, he always fantasized having Jack. On two occasions, Jack became quite drunk and Bobby made sure that the colonel got to bed. Both times, he went down on Jack and masturbated with Jack's flaccid penis inside his mouth. He wondered if Jack later realized what he had done, yet he never had the nerve to ask, fearing that bringing it into the open would prevent a reoccurrence.

Although Jack was protective of Bobby, he sometimes considered having him transferred, especially when the captain looked a little too hungrily at the other men in the facility or went on a drinking or drug binge. Bobby's actions became more and more brazen, and Jack's patience had begun to wear thin.

Harwin and Jack had just completed very difficult surgeries, during which Harwin's patient had died. They sat stoically in front of the television set in the room Harwin shared with Bobby. The news anchor man had nothing but bad news:

" . . . the worst defeat to date at the hands of the Latin American Alliance. Estimated casualties from the tragic battle at Elko, Nevada, range from forty to sixty thousand dead or wounded and over one hundred thousand captured by the enemy. Virtually the entire West Coast is now occupied by Alliance forces."

Harwin closed his eyes and sighed. "I guess I should feel terrified with all the bad news, but I'm really amazed at how lucky Bobby and I've been." He looked at Jack. "Did I ever tell you how Bobby and I got drafted?"

Jack shook his head, obviously tired and wishing he could get some sleep.

"When the epidemic started killing such a high percentage of fair people, I suspected that it was a genetically engineered virus. I knew that our chances of survival weren't good, especially with Bobby's whoring. So I abandoned my private practice in Long Beach and took Bobby to a friend's mountain cabin in the Wyoming Tetons. We survived off the land for six months."

Jack squinted at him. "You and Bobby? Living off the land?"

Harwin nodded.

"Shit."

"I'm serious," said Harwin indignantly. "Anyway, it wasn't long when the radio started reporting that the epidemic had finally run its course, so Bobby and I returned to Long Beach. Of course, the house'd been vandalized and all our belongings were gone. Worse, the Latin American Alliance had launched a major offensive along the entire Mexican border. And when Bobby and I tried to board a plane for Chicago, we were detained and questioned by army intelligence. They drafted us right on the spot and split us up right out of boot camp."

"I didn't know that," Jack said almost indifferently.

The television news anchor continued: "According to reliable sources, the President will announce a proposed cease-fire plan that will turn the current front into a demilitarized zone at approximately longitude one hundred fourteen, which is near the Nevada/Utah line. Preliminary reports from the Latin American Alliance headquarters in Caracas, however, indicate that the President's proposal has been rejected. Meanwhile . . . "

"How about you?" asked Harwin.

"What about me?"

"You're my best friend, but you never want to talk about your past."

"Well, what do you want to know?" asked Jack, yawning. "Hell, I'm in a good mood."

"How did you get into the war? Where is your wife? How many kids?" Harwin looked at his watch. "I got another few minutes."

Jack smiled. He never thought Harwin cared about his private life. "Shit, where do I start?"

"I don't even know where you went to medical school. I think I asked you once while we were doing surgery but an air raid interfered with your train of thought."

Jack nodded, chuckling. "Just like 'M.A.S.H.,' huh?" His mind wondered back to when he was a senior in high school. "Did I ever tell you that I was an all-state middle linebacker in high school back in Detroit?"

Harwin seemed pleased that he was at last about to hear Jack Deegan's life story. He crossed his arms and listened intently.

"I had my pick of any girl I wanted, Har, I shit you not. I really loved that pussy, boy. Couldn't get enough." His smile faded. "Then one day, my parents were sitting on the couch waiting for me when I got home from school. There was this guy there—the father of this really homely bitch I plugged one night when I was shit-faced. Naturally, she was pregnant and I figured that he just wanted my parents to pay for the abortion." He shook his head. "But it wasn't that simple. He wanted me to marry her." He waved his hands around. "Well, I said, 'No way, José,' and he said he'd *make* me marry her, and my parents were yelling at him and me, and . . . it was a real fiasco. Well, to make a long story short, the girl's old man was a wealthy fat cat and it was obvious that the guy was willing to go way, *way* out of his way to throw his weight around. My dad's boss even put pressure on my dad because this fat cat was a prime client. Finally I went to the guy and tried to reason with him, and he offered to put me through college in any field I wanted, provided I marry his

daughter and give her a couple more kids. That's all the fucker wanted. The deal was that, after about four or five years, we could divorce and I could go my merry way."

"Some shotgun, huh?"

"So I started figuring . . . and I said to myself, 'Hey, Jack *Nobody*, you can take your chances with college ball and hope you're good enough and in one piece to get into pro ball . . . or you can buckle down and get into pre-med at Wayne State. So my father-in-law paid for this big fucking wedding and into the medical field I went.

"But it was a nightmare, Har. I wasn't conditioned for all that studying and hard work. Worse, the baby came and she cried all the time and I couldn't get any sleep. And just about the time I started catching up in school and learning how to study, along comes my twin sons, Davy and Donny." His eyes became misty and he cleared his throat. "And . . . it wasn't long before we realized that they were born with congenital heart defects. They lived just four months."

Harwin seemed stunned. "Jesus, Jack, I had no idea."

"Janice and I never slept together after that and I threw myself into school, working harder than ever. By the time I got my degree, my father-in-law and I had become pretty tight, and he agreed to send me through medical school, in spite of the fact that Janice and I were on the outs. I guess he felt sorry for me over the loss of the twins." He sighed heavily. "After medical school I went into residency at Presbyterian Saint Luke's in Chicago and we got a divorce. I never saw Janice or my daughter again after that. She didn't want alimony or child support or *anything*. Then the real Jack Deegan showed his ugly head and I started having fun. First thing I did was have a vasectomy. I married a socialite and got into a medical partnership other doctors dream about. Of course, I got caught fucking around and she divorced my ass, but there was always someone better waiting in the wings. My third wife was into S and M, witchcraft, orgies and all kinds of strange shit, but she wasn't the least bit jealous . . . and goddamn was she good in bed. So I took up my own things like weightlifting, skin diving, sky diving and shit like that. "

"Really living on the edge, huh?" said Harwin, enraptured with what Jack was saying.

"I did all those things to keep in shape. Because it was too easy to fall into that trap of self-indulgence that Dixie—my third wife—was into. There was always lots of booze and cocaine and that really scared me, Har. So guess what I did?"

"What?" Harwin asked quickly, sitting on the edge of his chair.

"I divorced Dixie and joined the army and made a career out of it. I've been in nearly twenty years now."

Harwin squinted in disbelief. "You chose a military career? After all that?" He was incredulous. "But I met you on the front. Why did they put you on the front?"

Jack smiled, exposing his dazzling full set of teeth. "Do I look like a man who doesn't make enemies?

"But you were a lieutenant colonel!"

"That's because I have a lot of friends, too." Jack laughed at Harwin's expression. "Besides, like you said . . . I like to live on the edge."

A dazed Harwin looked at his watch and quickly left to scrub up for another scheduled surgery.

Jack headed for his monitor's post in a glass booth surrounded by four surgical units. When he wasn't doing surgery himself, he was sometimes watching other operations in progress. Reaching the booth, he sat and observed the preparation of Harwin's patient. He watched Harwin enter the area, followed by an obviously drunk Bobby, his assigned nurse. Looking nervously at Bobby, then Jack, Harwin proceeded with the experimental pancreatic surgery on a young gay man from the Baxter Flats internment camp. As the others looked on with contempt, Bobby became giddy and pulled the sheets up to see how the young man was hung.

Jack, his face crimson with rage, decided then that Bobby would have to be transferred. Phoning the chief of nurses and instructing him to replace Bobby immediately, he turned and left the booth in disgust.

Back in his office, Jack stared out the window at the cold desert, wondering how he would break the news to Harwin.

The telephone rang and he answered. "Colonel Deegan."

"Colonel!" shouted an officer from the security office. "A Brazilian stealth fighter just attacked Baxter Flats. Wiped it out with just one fuel mist bomb"

"Baxter Flats?" Jack was stunned. "Good God, that's twenty miles east of here! *Stealth* fighter? What are they doing with fucking *stealth* fighters?"

"Kicking our ass, Colonel. They captured a whole squadron in Nevada. Hey, wait, I'm picking up something."

Jack strained to hear.

"The guy's going fucking nuts up there, Colonel. Listen."

Jack could hear wild samba music.

"Oh, shit, Colonel. It's getting louder!"

"Sound the alert!" ordered Jack.

As the air raid alert sounded, Jack looked out

his window and saw the black aircraft streaking over the horizon. "Oh, fuck!" he yelled, running from his office and into the underground shelter across the hall.

In the hallway, people were running over one another to get to the shelter. Some tripped on the stairway and fell down the steps. Others became wedged in the entrance as too many tried to enter at the same time. Jack watched in horror from below as he anticipated a missile plowing through the complex. Knowing that there would be a massive surge in pressure, Jack pressed his palms against his ears and curled up on the floor, his back to the entrance. A massive explosion cleared the wedge at the shelter entrance, shattering eardrums and sending personnel crashing to the shelter floor. Jack looked up just as a wave of shattered glass rolled down the passageway, impregnating walls and flesh. The entire complex reverberated with deafening secondary explosions and Jack knew that a wall of flames would be racing to incinerate most of those not lucky enough to have made the shelter.

When the shaking stopped, an emergency generator went on and a dim light illuminated the dust-filled shelter. Jack recognized Harwin, sitting dazed against the opposite wall.

Rushing upstairs over several of the injured, Jack was surprised to see that the section containing his office was still intact. Looking toward the laboratories and surgical rooms, he saw nothing but sky, debris and parts of bodies. Hearing moans, he looked down to see three or four personnel in white smocks, writhing in pain and bleeding. He realized they were beyond help. He staggered across the hall and found Bobby just inside his office, a gaping wound in his right jaw. Soon, he was joined by Harwin, who grabbed Bobby and cradled him in his arms.

Harwin looked up at Jack helplessly, sobbing. He closed his eyes. "Oh, Bobby. Hang on, Baby. Don't leave me now. Don't leave me."

Jack, still dazed, his ears ringing, walked to the shattered windows and gazed at the destruction. He looked at Bobby again and realized that they had to get him to a surgical facility. "Cut the goddamn crying, Harwin, and stop his fucking bleeding. You're a doctor, for crissakes!"

Harwin looked at Jack as if he'd been slapped, then tore off strips of his shirt and stuffed them into the hole in Bobby's jaw. Applying pressure at the vein running to his jaw, he stopped the bleeding. Bobby awakened and wailed.

Jack opened his closet door and pulled out two heavily insulated jackets with hoods. He put on one and handed the other to Harwin, then found two blankets. "Wrap him in these and let's get the fuck out of here." He pulled a 10 millimeter pistol and ammunition from his desk drawer and placed them inside his jacket pockets.

Spotting an undamaged small truck in the parking lot, he grabbed the corresponding keys from his master key file. "Let's go."

Jack and Harwin wrapped Bobby inside the blankets and carried him to the truck. Just as they started the engine, the stealth fighter screamed overhead.

"Jesus, Jack, let's move it!" yelled Harwin.

The truck sped out of the parking lot and headed down a dirt road just as the aircraft returned for another pass. It fired a small missile at what was left of the facility, vaporizing it. Again, it turned and made yet another pass, this time toward their truck.

"MOTHERFUCKER!" screamed Harwin.

A single missile exploded two hundred yards behind them, almost knocking the truck off the road. Particles of frozen earth, pebbles and metal fragments blew out the back window and showered them with debris.

And then the fighter was gone. Jack stopped the truck and shook uncontrollably, his knuckles white from gripping the steering wheel.

2

The chilling wind couldn't banish the odors of war. Traces of exotic chemicals swirled about like airborne snakes, prompting Jack to breathe into his heavily insulated hood and hope that the gasses were not deadly. A stronger scent of decaying flesh wafted toward him from a nearby battlefield, littered with bodies and burned-out tanks and personnel carriers. Jack turned the truck away from the smell. He drove toward a group of four buildings inside a depression, surrounded by an outcropping of huge rocks. A huge sheet of camouflage netting had been draped over the entire complex.

The four modules, each about twenty by forty feet, appeared like sandstone monoliths, bathed in the half-light of dusk. They were dark and deserted; no vehicles were parked outside. There were no bodies near the buildings—no evidence of war. The camouflaged netting had obviously saved it from aerial attacks. Two coyotes darted from the back of the complex and stopped, sensing the new smell of living man. Seeing the idling truck, they scampered off into the desert, past pockets of snow left over from a blizzard the week before.

Harwin looked back at Bobby, still wrapped in blood-stained blankets, shivering and moaning.

"What do you think?" asked Jack, his voice raspy and weak.

Harwin cleared his throat with a phlegmy

cough, then glanced at Bobby in the back. "He won't make it if we don't try." He looked at the buildings in front of them. "Looks intact." He coughed deeply and spat up a small amount of blood. "Maybe they didn't pack when they left, huh?"

"What do we have to lose?" Jack glanced back at Bobby. "Hold on, Bobby. I feel lucky."

The truck groaned into a small parking lot in front of the connected modules. An overhang protected the front entrance, above which was a roughly painted sign reading "Ibapah General." On a ridge in back of the complex stood a generator and a water well with tank, likewise covered with netting. Jack, suffering from a sinus infection and nausea from the gasses, struggled out of the truck and walked stiffly to the entrance. The ice around the door cracked when he pulled it open.

Harwin got out and tried to lift Bobby but gave up when he couldn't muster the strength. He pulled the blankets from Bobby's face, causing the injured man to shriek as the cold air hit the wound.

"Harwin!" yelled Jack, staring in disbelief at the inside. It looked like any other small hospital's emergency room, complete with reception desk and clerical cubicles, made of bright, movable, cloth-lined panels. Since the panels were only five feet high, he could see how the previous residents had cordoned off the space into what he assumed were treatment rooms, waiting areas and administrative offices. He turned to his left and followed a hallway to the treatment rooms. He spied a "crash cart," complete with padded electrodes and control panel. Next to it was a hi-tech electrocardiograph. It suddenly occurred to him that the place was warm and he turned on a light switch, illuminating the section in which he stood. "Harwin!"

Inside the first treatment room was a portable X-ray machine and glass front cabinets filled with vials, syringes, saline bags, i.v.'s—all the other items needed for emergency room treatment. He followed tracks of dried blood stains through a double door into the next module.

It was divided by floor-to-ceiling walls, and he felt like he was walking along a hotel hallway. The blood stains on the carpeting led to the first door on his right. Hoping to find the intensive care ward and operating rooms, he opened the door and discovered a dark, bare storage room. Looking closer, he saw what appeared to be a standard size doorway on its side with a handle at the bottom. He lifted the handle and exposed an oddly shaped elevator. *A dumb waiter for patients*, he thought, turning to inspect the controls on the wall behind him. He touched a switch and an overhead light revealed an open, heavy steel door on the floor to his right. Suddenly, fluorescent lights blinked on below to show concrete steps leading through what appeared to be an eighteen-inch slab of concrete, down into a bunker. "HARWIN!"

Coughing in spasms, he struggled down the long stairway into a basement as large as the module above and divided into three rooms with clear plastic partitions. Inside the nearest room was a sparkling, modern surgical facility, complete with three stainless steel tables, bright lights and the ultimate in anesthesia, heart-lung and laser equipment. Stainless steel instruments sat neatly inside glass cases and mobile carts stood nearby for every surgical emergency. In the next room was a glass-front refrigerator filled with whole blood and vials of injectable medication. It contained some of the most advanced medicines available, such as healing accelerants, synthetic hormones and even some of the compounds his Simpson Springs group had developed. Cabinets filled with packages of drugs and shelves holding surgical gowns, sheets and latex gloves lined the wall. The third room was a three-bed intensive care unit, complete with sophisticated monitoring equipment. Off in a corner was a prosthesis lab, complete with powdered components and molds of various human bones and limbs, as well as denture molds.

Harwin scurried down the stairway behind him."Holy shit," he mumbled, sweeping back his parka hood.

"Jesus, it's a fucking bunker. The ceiling must be over a foot thick," said Jack. "They must've left in a hurry, huh?"

Harwin's voice cracked with emotion. "It's a miracle."

"I'll get Bobby," said Jack, quickly. "We're going into surgery, so scrub up." He looked around the area like it was filled with gold. "Then we're gonna seal this cocksucker off and hide it from the Alliance."

Harwin slowly walked into the operating room, his eyes wide with wonder. "They'll know this was a medical facility, Jack."

Jack shook his head with resolve. "No, Har. We'll move most of the medical shit down here and tell the cocksuckers that the Yanks took all the good stuff. We'll turn one of the rooms upstairs into a first aid station and leave some of the medical supplies up there for a dispensary. We'll pretend that we're just squatter refugees."

"They'll inspect the place, Jack." Harwin didn't look at him; his gaze was locked on the rows of surgical instruments.

Jack smiled. "We'll board up the dumb waiter and put carpeting over the metal door. . . . Turn it into a storage room."

Harwin nodded absently, looking for the correct instruments for Bobby's surgery. "Then what?"

"Remember those prostate and penile implant experiments they were doing down the road at Baxter Flats?" asked Jack, his face betraying deep thought.

Harwin ignored him and pulled two vials from the refrigerator.

"I heard that some urology man proposed sex changes to rectify the mutilation."

Harwin turned, irritated. "Please, Jack, let's get Bobby before he freezes to death."

Jack turned and headed for the stairs, mumbling, "I'll bet those four guys we passed back a few miles were from that camp. I wonder if they're still alive?" He stopped and turned back to Harwin, laughing. "Harwin, if you knew what I was planning to do, you would SHIT."

3

Jack and Harwin found that a star-shaped piece of shrapnel had entered Bobby's right cheek and embedded in the roof of his mouth. Although most of Bobby's teeth were shattered and both maxillary sinuses were punctured, his jaw bone had been spared. Entering the sinuses by punching through facial bones from inside Bobby's nostrils, Harwin painstakingly repaired the sinus membranes, then extracted all of Bobby's teeth. Shortly thereafter, Jack delicately rearranged some of the small muscles in the roof of Bobby's mouth. He essentially "weaved" the wound closed in order to ensure a tight seal. Both doctors knew that the bone would grow back in time, making the closure permanent, and that the prosthesis lab would provide Bobby with a new set of teeth.

As Bobby lay recovering in the three-bed ward, Jack treated Harwin for an even worse case of sinus infection than his own. Injecting a heavy dose of a potent antibiotic, Jack forced him to lie in the second bed. Injecting himself with the same drug, he bundled up and left the complex in search of the four men.

4

Unsure of where he was heading, Jack stopped the truck, afraid that he wouldn't be able to find his way back. There was no moon and pockets of fog were everywhere. He wondered how close the enemy was and whether Alliance officers would believe that they were only refugees. *Of course they won't, you idiot. And if we take our uniforms off, they'll shoot us as spies.* He wondered what their chances were as prisoners-of-war. *But then we're doctors, aren't we? Surely the Alliance needs doctors.* He glanced down at the Colonel insignia on his collar. *Back to the front again? No way.*

He drove on.

Four miles from the complex he spotted two men wrapped in blankets, sitting together along the side of the dirt road. He left the motor running and cautiously checked the men out. They were dead, frozen solid.

Further on, he turned onto a wider dirt road, looking around for some object to help him find his way back. He spotted a milestone in the form of a burned-out tank about a hundred yards to his left, then drove another mile or so. Entering thick fog, he stopped the truck and killed the engine, then rolled down the window to listen. He heard voices ahead and quietly got out of the truck.

Moving away from the roadway, he carefully walked ahead, squinting to see through the fog.

He heard several pairs of feet rushing toward him. A young man spoke: "It was a fuckin' truck, Rhino. Just ahead."

"Shut the fuck up, man," another man growled softly.

Jack stood still and watched as four silhouettes passed by him, then disappeared again in the fog.

"A truck!" yelled another.

Jack moved back toward the truck, his pistol drawn.

"Hey, the driver cut out! Let's go!"

Jack rushed the truck just as its engine started, placing his pistol barrel between the driver's eyes. He could now determine that the four were young black men dressed in as much clothing as they could get on.

"Now that's not very polite," Jack said calmly. "If you want a ride, you should ask."

"Shit, man," said the closer man in the back seat. "What are you gonna do, take us back to the fuckin' camp? Ain't no camp there no more, man."

The young man in the front passenger seat looked closely at Jack's collar." Hey Rhino, this fucker's a bird colonel!"

"You're from the gangbanger camp, aren't you?" asked Jack.

"Yeah, man, did you think we wuz from the fag camps?" growled a huge man in back seat on the far side.

"You Rhino?" asked Jack.

"Right on, motherfucker."

"If you don't all get out of my truck in ten seconds, I'm going to blow this man's brains out."

There was a period of agonizing silence, then Rhino pushed the back of the front seat. "Let's go."

Jack stood back and carefully watched as the four men got out on both sides of the truck. As Rhino swung around on the other side to close the door, Jack thought he could see a glint of metal. He searched the eyes of the two men closest to him and

saw that they were glancing nervously at Rhino.

"You're on your own. I'm not taking you anywhere," said Jack, warily monitoring Rhino's movements.

As Rhino rounded the hood of the truck, he turned partially away from Jack and reached inside his coat.

Jack shot him once through the head, then scanned the others with the pistol. They were transfixed and slowly held up their arms.

"Okay, start walking back where you came from."

They obeyed and began to walk away from the truck, glancing back anxiously at Rhino's body.

As they disappeared in the fog, Jack turned the truck around and drove back toward the complex, convinced that the four gay men he'd seen before were no longer in the area . . . or dead.

As he reached the intersection near the burned-out tank, he stopped and surveyed the area, which was clear of fog. He pulled a flashlight from the glove compartment and shined it on the tank. Noticing a slight movement near the tank, he killed the engine. He listened carefully and thought he could hear moaning. "Bingo," he whispered, getting out of the truck.

When he reached the tank, he saw three men huddled together under a blanket. A fourth lay dead and undressed nearby, his clothing obviously taken by the others.

Alvaro Sanchez looked up at Jack with frost-lined eyes. He had no eyebrows and his skin appeared burned.

"Were you guys at Baxter Flats?"

Alvaro stared at him blankly.

"I'm a doctor," said Jack at length, reaching to pull away the blanket.

"No!" shouted Alvaro, coughing. "Freezing," he said weakly.

"Were you at Baxter Flats?" repeated Jack, looking at the undressed corpse.

"Tony," Alvaro said softly.

"What?"

Alvaro stared at the frozen young man. "Tony's cold," he choked.

"Did they mutilate you?" Jack examined Alvaro's pupils with the flashlight.

Tears welled in the young man's eyes as he nodded. "Please . . . please . . . help us."

"Oh, I'll help you all right," assured Jack, acutely excited. "We're going to help each other. We're going to survive this fucking war and, maybe . . . just maybe we might have some fun doing it."

III

MOONFINCH AND THE WOMAN

1

Summer, 1999

Moonfinch lay stretched out on a flat, sun-warmed rock, resting his weary legs for the first time that day. He smiled at the clouds, relieved that his journey was almost over. It was a fierce, proud smile, like those of his ancestors from another era. Except for the compact submachine gun lying next to him, he could have been a reincarnated Cochise or Geronimo, with long black hair and headband. His bare chest was lustrous bronze, his body lithe and powerful, like his predecessors who terrorized the U.S. Army in 1885.

He sat up and gazed at Idaho and Wyoming to his right and part of the Great Salt Lake Desert to his left. Higher up, he could have seen what was left of Salt Lake City, but chose to conserve his strength. The city would come into view later. He was content for now to rest up for the hundred or so miles to go and to watch his big chestnut stallion graze in the high grass of a small valley below. Soon, the young Apache brave would swing around to the south pass, bypassing Salt Lake City altogether, avoiding the snipers and renegades who thrived on the lawlessness of war.

Two ravens soared nearby. *They observe me with flat, black, wise eyes,* he thought. He envied their bond, amazed that despite the poison gas and biological warfare, they seemed to thrive. But then, they had each other for life and there was carnage to pick over for miles around. Ravens were survivors and he admired that.

American surface-to-surface missiles screamed from the Wyoming plateau to the east, heading for the Mexican and their allied American Indian divisions in central and western Utah. It was his cue to get moving, to follow the missiles. He had much to tell and many lives would be saved with the intelligence he'd gathered by blending in with the desert and observing. *Just as my ancestors had done over a hundred years before,* he thought. Only this time, the Indians were winning the war, thanks to the help of the Latin American Alliance and the virulent, deadly "white flu," now ebbing and becoming a thing of the past.

Rejoining his horse, he rode through a final pass and headed southwest as the panorama of the Great Salt Lake Desert lay before him. On the horizon a line of black and bronze smoke rose from the missile hits over a hundred miles away. As he

descended into the huge basin, he saw the ruins of the interstate freeway and the burned-out trucks and tanks. Toward Salt Lake City, two helicopters hovered near a massive fire. He heard retaliatory missiles coming from the direction of Nevada, devastating American targets in the vicinity of Salt Lake City. Other larger missiles soared higher, no doubt headed for targets in Wyoming and Colorado. He knew that it went that way, day in and day out, as the Alliance pounded the weakening resistance in its attempt to push the last, decimated American divisions eastward. Soon all the land west of the Rockies would be theirs, he was convinced.

Carefully, he guided his horse down the precarious slope as the sun slipped lower on the horizon, its brilliant rays weakened by haze. He got off the horse and led him on foot to a row of trees, which would be their shelter for the night. Confident that they would be out of sight of the helicopters, he tied up the horse to a tree and went in search of food before darkness descended.

2

He heard the sound of men laughing and silently moved in that direction, his Toro automatic rifle in firing position. Reaching a precipice, he peered over it and saw four American soldiers milling about as a fifth attempted to fix something under the hood of a troop truck. The vehicle, pointing in the direction of Wyoming, was parked on the shoulder of a paved, two-lane road. Scanning the group again, he noticed a female prisoner sitting on the ground behind the others. One of the soldiers pushed another playfully and walked to the woman. He looked down at her, then grabbed her by the arm and dragged her into the woods. She kicked at him, and he hit her with his fist. When both were out of sight, the woman began to scream.

Suddenly feeling clammy, Moonfinch silently backed away. He knew that he had to find food before nightfall.

Sitting in the dark, he munched on pine nuts and blackberries. He drifted back to the last time he had seen a woman raped . . . .

He was only five and, because he had a temperature, had been left behind when his father and brothers went on a hunting trip. Highly irritated, he took his frustrations out on his mother, who tried to do household chores with little Moonfinch underfoot. Later, the fever went up, and his mother put him to bed.

He was awakened sometime later by the slamming of the front door, but he assumed that it was his father and brothers returning. Then he heard his mother's screams. He ran into the living room, where two obviously drunk white men were attacking her. Fiercely, he attacked the taller of the men, kicking and biting him, but the man held him by the forehead at arm's length, laughing at his flailing. Moonfinch glanced at his mother, who had fainted on the floor and was being mounted by the other man. The sickening smell of beer breath mixed with the stench of the rapist's rancid penis overwhelmed him. He curled up in a fetal position on the floor and stared at his mother's face.

As the man finished and was replaced by the taller one, Moonfinch's mother became conscious again and began to scream. The taller man hit her in the face with his fist, causing her to faint again. With that, Moonfinch turned his head away and wept.

Minutes passed and he realized that the room had grown quiet. He looked up and saw that the two men had left, prompting him to quickly run to his mother. Fetching a blanket from a closet, Moonfinch gently covered his mother, then lay next to her in an attempt to bring her to consciousness.

Although everyone knew of the two rapist brothers, the sheriff's deputies insisted that in spite of his mother's testimony, they had no case, and no charges were ever filed. Eerily, Moonfinch's father had remained quiet during the entire investigation and ignored the taunts from the others in the tribe over his lack of action. But even young Moonfinch could tell that his father was not quiet on the inside.

One day, the two white brothers left a Tucson bar drunk and drove off to "fuck another squaw," according to witnesses. Their truck was found in the desert, sixteen miles away, and they were never seen again. Moonfinch never forgot the expression on his father's face the day after word got out about the brothers.

Later that night, Moonfinch was awakened by renewed screams from the female prisoner, interspersed with shouts and laughter from the group of soldiers. At first, he tried to ignore the screams, but they took on a pitiful, pleading timbre which seemed directed at him personally. Silently, he found his way to the precipice again and saw the truck in the same spot. There was now a campfire and the woman was tied spread-eagled on the ground in full view, her clothing torn away. One of the men had just finished raping her and another was about to mount her.

"No! No! Oh, God!" the woman screamed.

"Shut up, you fucking dyke!"

"Someone stick a dick down her throat."

"Fuck you, man—she'll bite the sombitch off!"

They all laughed in spite of her gut-wrenching

sobs.

"Just two more miles and you'd been gone!" yelled one of the waiting soldiers. "Talk about rotten luck."

"This ain't nothin' compared to what they gonna do to you when we get you back, sweet lips," said another.

Moonfinch watched as two more soldiers assaulted her. He wondered why he felt an attraction to her. It was as if her wails were like the siren who lured sailors to the rocks.

As she lay bleeding and moaning, the soldiers drank from a half-gallon bottle. After a short time, they seemed to be feeling the effects of the liquor, and one suggested a game of football with a partially deflated soccer ball on the deserted highway. Turning on the truck lights to light the "field," they chose up sides and began to play roughly.

The young Apache slipped down the slope and circled to the rear of the truck, then crept up to the woman. Her eyes were glassy, and she was mumbling something he couldn't comprehend.

"You cocksucker!" yelled one of the soldiers from the other side of the truck, startling Moonfinch. "That was out of bounds, goddamnit!"

Moonfinch looked into her eyes and felt an alien emotion. He was confounded that he had risked his life just to come down to see how she was.

Then she looked up at him and screamed.

"Hey, look!" yelled one of the soldiers, spotting the Indian.

Moonfinch shot the three soldiers nearest him with three short bursts from his Toro, then took cover in front of the truck. All three were killed instantly, a neat line of red holes streaking across each man's chest. Of the two remaining, one stood transfixed as the other turned and ran. Moonfinch jumped from the cover of the truck and brought down the runner with a neat line across his back. The fifth soldier pleaded for mercy, but the Apache shook his head, glancing down at the girl.

The soldier turned and ran, but the Moonfinch didn't shoot. He wanted the U.S. Army to know what happened. He remembered something his father had said: *Terror is a very effective weapon.* He released the brake on the truck, watching it careen backwards down the hill and over a cliff.

He turned and looked at the woman again, finally pulling out his hunting knife and cutting her loose. She began to weep softly and attempted to cover up her exposed genitals.

He shook his head in bewilderment and pity.

IV

JACK'S WHOREHOUSE

1

Three Days Later

Just after sunrise, a Cuban-built pickup with Latin American Alliance insignia sped down a freshly graded dirt road near the Nevada/Utah line, not far from the abandoned town of Ibapah, Utah. In the passenger seat sat a stocky, middle-aged Mexican captain wearing a crisp khaki uniform and sunglasses. A sergeant driver and two privates with automatic weapons accompanied him. The captain was assigned to monitor the hygiene and supply the needs of accredited bordellos in the region. In gratitude for supplying a much needed diversion for their troops, the Alliance supplied the bordellos with fuel oil, food and medicine, but insisted that all prostitutes be disease-free. According to the record on file, the bordello toward which he was heading had been a U.S. Army Field Hospital. A band of refugees, reportedly trying to reach Los Angeles, had taken over the abandoned complex and turned it into a whore house.

The purpose of his visit was not to inspect, however. As the vehicle pulled to a stop at the front entrance, one of the soldiers ran to the door and nailed a sign to it. Captain Herrera looked up at the rough lettering above the door, which read, "IBAPAH JACK'S." Smiling smugly, he gestured for the others to wait outside, then entered.

"Jack!" he yelled, walking into the center of the module.

At the left of the entrance was a long, solid pine bar with six swivel-top barstools in a variety of colors. Four unfinished tables, each with four chairs of assorted sizes and shapes, stood on the right. Against the opposite wall, doors led to three small enclosures made of plywood. At each end of the building were corridors to the other modules.

Herrera smiled and walked to the third enclosure door, which had a three-inch diameter hole drilled at crotch level. He squatted and peered through the hole, then stood and ground his crotch into it, chuckling. "Goddamn, honey, you do it good!"

The first door opened and Jack Deegan, shirtless and wearing earphones, leaned against the door jamb shaking his head in amazement while flipping a screwdriver in his hand. As Herrera backed away from the hole sheepishly, Jack pulled off the earphones and threw the screwdriver onto a bed. "There's supposed to be someone on the other

side, Captain," he said, in Castillian Spanish.

"Jack, *amigo*," said the captain, embarrassed. He extended his hand. "I called for you but there was no answer." He pointed at the earphones and chuckled, his face crimson.

Jack shook his hand, absently putting on a shirt. "Just doing a little improvement. I'm installing a video monitor for the *enhanced pleasure* of your troops. You're six hours early," he continued in Spanish. "Don't tell me this is an official visit." He gestured for the captain to sit at the bar.

"Hey, man, you can speak to me in English, you know," said the captain. "I ain't no dummy."

Jack shrugged his shoulders and smiled apologetically. He knew that he was pushing his luck with someone as volatile and unpredictable as Herrera.

The captain followed Jack to the bar and sat next to him. "My superiors are a little nervous about that hole, man, what with those new cases of—what is that shit called, man?"

Jack shrugged again.

"No, man, *you* know. That *new* one. Cy . . . Cy . . . ."

"You mean Cythrax," said Jack impatiently in English. "New cases where?"

The captain playfully spun around on the stool. "Two privates down near the New Mexico front."

"Shit, Captain. How the hell could they blame me?"

"The dudes were through this area. They can't prove they were here . . . " He stopped swiveling and looked at Jack seriously. " . . . but maybe they don't need to, Jack, *comprende*?"

Jack's neck veins protruded slightly as he struggled to maintain control. "What is this, the only cat house between the front and Las Vegas?"

"It's the only one with a glory hole, my friend."

Jack smiled mockingly. "Your troops line up for it at half price, Captain. We spray it with disinfectant every morning."

"The girls or the hole?" The captain laughed alone at his own joke.

Jack shook his head, then reminded himself that he had to humor Herrera. "So how goes World War Three?"

"Not good, Jack." Herrera's expression turned dark and serious. "We're at a stalemate. We pushed the Yanks to the base of the Continental Divide, but they dug in good, man. But since the bad-assed Cubans and Brazilians are to the south end and us and the Indians to the north, it won't take too long—especially with all that Japanese money. I guess you heard about the Europeans . . . completely overrun by Chinese and Moslems."

"Jesus, who would have figured it?" Jack could read Herrera's thoughts: The light skinned, blue-eyed masters of the world are now merely a hated minority, destined for slavery or worse. He shuddered at the thought of the revenge taking place all over the world against the fair-haired South Africans, Israelis, Europeans and all those South Americans with European names and money. And soon, it would be the Americans, probably the most hated of all. "So much for the superpowers."

Herrera began to spin again. "The superpowers ain't super anymore, man!" He laughed. "Stupid fuckin' Yanks. Shit—they draft all these blacks, man, and all of them defect to the Alliance. We ain't seen a dead *negro* in six fuckin months, I shit you not. And when we capture one, they beg us to let them fight for us and kill 'them white motherfuckers.'"

Jack smirked. "I thought blacks and Mexicans hated each other."

"Still do!" He laughed heartily. "We just hate white asses more, you dig? Goddamn, that epidemic was fuckin' heaven sent, wasn't it?"

Jack crossed his arms and nodded his head, dreading the answer to his next question. "So, what happens to us?

Herrera studied Jack's face, then sighed. "In my mind, once we break through the Divide, it'll be over. Even if it isn't, I see no reason why you and your little group can't head for California." He suddenly laughed. "Man, if you thought it was Hispanic and Asian before, wait'll you see it now. L.A., the second largest city in Mexico with the largest Japanese population outside of Tokyo!"

"Yeah. And everything I have belongs to someone else now, so where would I go? Do you think all those Chicanos and Asians are going to accept *gringos* —even half *gringos* like me— with open arms? Hell man, I'd rather stay here than live in a camp."

Herrera regarded him icily. "It's interesting how you say you're half *gringo* and not half Spanish."

Realizing just how dangerous Herrera was, Jack said nothing.

Herrera jumped off the barstool and walked down to a bottle of vodka. "Camps? Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you. The Japanese say they have a camp all picked out for whites." He took a swig out of the bottle and sighed, looking back at Jack with a playful expression. "They said they would offer you guys ten grand apiece for your trouble . . . in about thirty years." He slapped his leg and laughed loudly, then sat again with the bottle in hand. He seemed to study Jack, as if gauging just how much he was intimidating the big man. "Soon, we get a new commanding officer for this region. An Apache, man. Two-star general, too. Dude may even be a direct descendant of Cochise."

"You got to be kidding. An Apache?" Jack wondered if it was another joke.

"Used to be a chief. He's something else, man. Dude's already rallied the American Navajo, Hopi and Pueblo, man. Uh, what else?" He counted with his fingers. "Havasupai, Southern Paiute, Jicarilla. Next, he's gonna stir up these local tribes too, like the Gosiute and Shoshoni. They're all good fighters, too." He chuckled. "We give these fuckers all that firepower and they go fucking crazy, man. Hell, it's like the good old days when the Apaches were scaring the shit out of the white eyes."

Jack attempted an indifferent look, but a slight bit of sarcasm slipped through.

"You don't believe it, do you?" asked Herrera, taking another swallow of vodka.

Jack looked down. "Sure, I believe you."

"Shit, Jack. The Indians were *never* Americans." Again, he got off the barstool and walked to the center of the room, turning and punctuating his words with the bottle. "Americans always treated the Mexicans and Indians and blacks—and fuckin' Asians—like *shit*. Where do you think *I'm* from, Jack?"

Jack shrugged and shook his head.

"East L.A., man. *East L.A.*." He walked back to Jack and placed the bottle on the bar with a bang. Peering in Jack's eyes, he asked, "Where are you from, Jack?"

"You know where I'm from, Captain," Jack said, at length.

Herrera shook his head slowly, then nodded toward the rear. "How in the fuck did you come across all those foxes, man? Huh? I mean, here we are, miles from nowhere at an abandoned Army hospital and you come up with three of the best-looking hookers I've ever seen." He began ambling toward the front door.

Jack got off his barstool and walked with him. "I told you: they worked for me in L.A."

Herrera shook his head again and sucked at a food particle between his teeth. "Naw, man. I ain't buyin' that shit. I mean, you got this dinky truck outside and you say that you and two faggot bartenders and three hookers hightailed it up here from L.A.?"

"I told you," said Jack softly and patiently, "the girls were flown up by this American Air Force colonel at the beginning of the war and the guys worked for me in L.A. I was just a subsidized pimp. I ran a whore house in L.A., I ran one for the U.S. Air Force and now I'm running one for the Alliance. I'm a *businessman,* Captain."

Herrera stopped and faced him. "Know what I think? I think you deserted from the Yanks, man—you and those two weirdos. Haven't figured out about the *mujeres* yet, but I know Cindy never came up from L.A. Hell, I lived all over L.A. before I joined with Mexico and there weren't no fucking Anglo whores, man. They'd have been torn to shreds by all that dark pussy . . . and Alvara's a fuckin' Puerto Rican. There ain't no PR's in L.A. any more, man."

Jack forced a wide smile. "Would I lie to my best customer?"

"As you drove the knife to the hilt, motherfucker." Herrera continued walking to the door.

Jack stopped at the end of the bar and sat on the last barstool. "Oh, Captain."

Herrera turned and looked at Jack with self-satisfaction.

"What did you come by for?"

Herrera took a toothpick from his shirt pocket and picked at his teeth. "We just nailed an 'off-limits' sign to your door. Your place is temporarily off-limits to Alliance troops." He shrugged and held out his arms as Jack's smile faded. "Hey, Jack, it wasn't my doin'—just following orders." He smiled. "But I'll be back, *amigo*. If your girls are real nice to me, maybe I'll get the off limits lifted sooner." He turned and walked into the doorway, then glanced back. "And maybe I won't recommend an investigation about how you got here." He smiled arrogantly and left.

Jack grabbed a glass and savagely threw it against the wall behind the bar, then banged both fists on the counter.

Wearing a caftan, Harwin shuffled into the bar from the men's living quarters on the left and went behind the bar. "What did you break this time?" he asked acidly, with a slight theatrical inflection. He gingerly stepped around the broken glass.

Not looking up, Jack buried his face in his hands. "Fuck you."

Harwin reached for a bottle of bourbon and poured himself a shot.

"Fuck me . . . fuck us all!" Jack continued.

"What was all that hammering? Does it have anything to do with your foul mood?" He swallowed the contents of the shot and grimaced. Looking again at the broken glass, he shook his head and swept it into a corner with a nearby broom.

"Captain Herrera just left."

Harwin came around the bar and sat next to Jack. "*That* asshole."

"He put us off limits."

"Good," said Harwin, sighing. "Maybe I can have sex with Bobby again. All he does any more is squat behind that goddamn glory hole, sucking one soldier's dick after another."

Jack ignored him. "He also threatened to start a probe into how we all got here."

Harwin observed him seriously. "What do we do?"

"Kill the motherfucker."

He wondered if he'd heard Jack correctly. "Excuse me?"

"Kill the sonofabitch, Har," he repeated with clenched teeth.

Harwin shook his head. "How? He won't come back if we're off-limits. And if they lift it, he won't come back alone.

"He'll be back." Jack smiled with a tinge of savagery. "That fucker is kinky, Har. He can't do his routine if his troops are here. He probably put us off limits himself, just so he *could* have the run of the place."

"So what's *his* perversion?"

Jack glanced at the enclosure door with the hole in it. "He's fascinated with the glory hole. He got drunk one night when he made his first inspection and told me about when he was a stud in L.A. He'd go into those private sex mazes and end up shooting a load into every cubicle."

"He's gay?" asked Harwin, taking another shot, then putting the bottle away.

Jack rolled his eyes up. "Christ, Harwin, you gay fuckers think that anyone who drops a load in a guy's mouth is gay. You're so goddamn desperate to increase your numbers. '*We are everywhere, we are everywhere*,'" he mocked in an affected accent.

"Okay, okay," said Harwin, shaking his head as if it was an abrasive subject which had been brought up before.

"There's no handle for a weirdo like him. He likes broads, but he also likes *holes*. It's the *holes* that turn him on."

"Sounds like Bobby. Only he's fascinated with the other side of the hole."

Jack stared at the doors in back. "Maybe we could throw a little party for him. Just him and a couple of the girls . . . or so he'll think."

"Are you serious?" He studied Jack. "You can't be serious."

Jack looked contemptuous. "You figure it out! What if they knew about the girls? What if they find out about us being deserters? What if they find out what we did in the fucking war? *What if they find out about what's hidden downstairs!!* Use your goddamn head!" He abruptly walked toward the enclosure doors to cool off, narrowly missing Bobby, who was sleepily approaching from the men's living quarters, wearing a sweat shirt and underwear.

Bobby had gained weight, and his personality had changed for the better. Now, he had dancing eyes and a surgically improved mouth, which seemed to always be on the brink of laughing. He projected a gay affectation, yet there was an underlying, contradictory masculinity. "Are you two fighting again?" he asked, quietly sitting next to Harwin.

"You really think Herrera would say anything?" asked Harwin, ignoring Bobby. "And if he did, what proof do they have?"

"Jesus, Harwin! There's a fucking *world war* going on outside and you think you still have *rights?* Shit, man, if the Mexican Army arrests you, why, you can just call your lawyer, right!? " Jack's face turned crimson.

Bobby swiveled around and looked back and forth at each man. "What about Herrera? Proof about what?"

Jack absently sat on the other side of Bobby. "They don't need proof. All they need is the *suspicion.*"

Bobby became perplexed. "Will someone please fill me in?"

Harwin finally acknowledged Bobby. "Captain Herrera's put us off limits to Alliance troops. Plus, he's threatening to have us probed."

Bobby flashed a bright smile. "Oh, honey, he could probe me any day."

Both Harwin and Jack glared at him.

"So kill the sonofabitch," said Bobby flatly.

Harwin and Jack glanced at the ceiling, then at each other, shaking their heads in unison. All three men fell pensively silent.

Jack broke the spell. "That's what I think, too, but Harwin doesn't agree. Would you be willing to do it?"

"If I had to," Bobby said without hesitation. "They start asking questions and getting suspicious and we're all dead. They'd kill us in a split second."

Jack was surprised at Bobby's attitude. He searched Harwin's dumbstruck expression.

Bobby continued. "The only serious problem is, you know, how? Herrera's no fool. He knows he's got us up against the wall, so he'll be on guard."

"Maybe not," offered Harwin. "Maybe he's just playing with us. Maybe he just wants to intimidate us into treating him special. That's more or less what you said, Jack, didn't you?"

Jack nodded. "He wants that too, but he's gonna blow the whistle when it suits him. We can't take a chance, Har."

"So how?" Bobby repeated.

"When he's vulnerable," said Jack.

"When is that?" asked Bobby, enraptured.

"When he blows his nuts." Jack smiled, amused at Harwin's look of horror and Bobby's obvious glee.

"All right!" Bobby clapped his hands, startling Harwin. "Very appropriate, Big Daddy. Very appropriate. They say that orgasm and death are so . . . *interrelated*, you know. It's a point when the ego is shattered. It's like . . . ."

"Oh Bobby, not that again," Harwin said, with a wave of his hand.

"What do you think, Har?" prodded Jack.

Harwin seemed frightened.

"That's right, Har," Jack said softly, "search that methodical brain of yours for an alternative, but you won't find one."

Harwin fingered his drink nervously. "You're right. As usual, you're right." He downed his drink and poured another one. "Our only chance of survival is to quietly wait out this war. Then, we blend in with the crowd."

"Yeah," said Bobby. "Like the—what was he, the Angel? That guy, Mengele in Paraguay?"

Harwin frowned and gave Bobby a sharp look.

"Tell you where I'd like to blend in," continued Bobby, oblivious to Harwin's displeasure. "Amsterdam."

"Holland's probably occupied by Chinese and Moslems by now," offered Jack.

"There's still a lot of fair-skinned people left. It shouldn't be that difficult to blend in as close as Seattle," said Harwin. "Even Toronto or Montreal."

"Montreal would be great." Bobby rambled on. "I'll bet it would be really gay, you know. Throughout history, the big cities turn *very* gay after a war, my dear."

Ignoring Bobby, Harwin continued, deep in thought. "It's not like when Germany was defeated in World War Two—all those war crimes trials." He chuckled sardonically. "It's all scorched earth out there. Very little evidence of wrong doing. We were more *efficient*."

"We didn't use ovens," offered Bobby.

"Bobby, would you stop your *bantering* !?" snapped Harwin.

"Bobby, go get the girls," said Jack. "We need to have a meeting."

Bobby got off the barstool and walked toward the opposite women's living quarters module, defiantly mumbling something unintelligible to Harwin.

Harwin stared into his drink. "No evidence of stealing pineals and pituitaries from derelicts." His eyes widened. "Police!"

Jack drew back and stared wildly at Harwin, who suddenly began addressing an imaginary audience in the room.

"Police! Arrest that fiend. He's the one who stole my pituitary gland ten years ago in Utah." In falsetto, he said, "Help! This fiend did genetic experimentation on me and I gave birth to quintuplet moray eels!"

Jack became irritated. "By all means, fuck yourself up with booze and guilt."

"Oh, and you had no guilt, right?" Harwin spat, caustically. "I was *forced* to use a scalpel, and you were the *enforcer* ! If only you could feel a *shred* of guilt!"

"*Enforcer?* Yeah, I was the boss and I wielded a lot of power," Jack shot back. "Enough power to keep you and that *screamer* out of the gay meat grinder. Sure, we had to do experimental surgery—we got our hands dirty—but we didn't intentionally kill anyone, even though we had a fucking gun to our heads. Never forget what would have happened had we refused the assignment, buster"

"Maybe we'd have been better off."

"Harwin, don't. Not now." A rare look of concern came to Jack's face. "Too much has gone through the gates. We need each other." He waited to see if his words had any effect. "What would you have me do, Harwin? You want me to see myself as a monster so I can ravage myself with guilt? Am I a monster to you?"

Harwin sighed and looked sadly at his hands. "I suppose, as long as we furnish enough mouths and manufactured pussies . . . " He chuckled. " . . . for all their sour *dicks* and keep them from thinking about who we really are . . . " He glanced at Jack. " . . . then we'll make it, won't we, Jack? We'll always have to live with what we were, but at least we'll live."

Jack locked his big arm around Harwin's neck and mussed his hair. It was the only way he knew to show affection toward another man. "Yes, Har. We'll make it."

"So, yeah . . . I guess we'll have to kill Herrera," he almost whispered.

Jack released his hold on Harwin, just as two of the girls entered the module with Bobby.

Cindy was a petite, Anglo brunette in her early twenties. Tina was built like Cindy, but was an African American and in her late teens. Wearing robes, both had mussed-up, short hair and puffy eyes. They'd just been awakened from a sound sleep.

"Could we get this meeting over with so we can get back to the soaps," whined Cindy. "I mean, *really* ."

"Yeah," piped Tina, "and I was on my way out to shop at Neiman's."

Jack looked at them seriously and they quickly sat at a table with Bobby. They watched Jack attentively.

"Where's Alvara?" asked Jack.

"She was right behind me," answered Bobby. "She's mad at the world again."

Slow footsteps emerged from the corridor and Alvaro appeared. Although he still called himself Alvaro, the others used the female version of his name, now that he was anatomically a female and had the body of a masculine, athletic female. The hormone treatments had somewhat filled out his body and the hard, almost hairless torso had become supple and completely hairless. Wearing a slinky nightgown, he moved slowly and defiantly, leaning against a far wall, away from the others.

Jack scanned them all. "Herrera thinks that a

couple of their soldiers may have caught Cythrax here."

"Oh, Jesus," murmured Cindy.

"Cythrax?" said Tina, frowning.

"Cythrax," confirmed Jack.

Cindy looked at Tina. "Shit. If anything, they'd give it to *us*."

Tina nodded. "Yeah . . . who else would we get it from, a roadrunner?"

Jack slipped off his barstool and slowly walked to the entrance, turning. "We're going to do some tests to see who, if anyone, has it. What'd I tell you jokers? Huh?" He pored over the group. "I told you to check yourselves. All of you know the symptoms, for crissakes. They trace that disease back here and we're all dead." He walked to the front of the bar, looking sternly at them one at a time. "And if that isn't enough, we've got questions being asked about where we all came from. So we've got to come together now. We've been through a lot, and we can make it if we stick together. Don't offer information to anyone." He walked toward the other end of the bar. "Try to be as feminine as possible until the hormone treatments are a hundred percent. The war's almost over now, so it won't be much longer."

"What happens when it does end, Jack?" asked Cindy. "What do we do?"

"Somehow, some way, I'll get you all either to Seattle or Los Angeles. They're our best bets. Neither's been that torn up by the war and both are like melting pots." He glanced at Tina and Alvaro. "You two won't have too much trouble blending in—I probably won't— but the rest of you'll have a rough go of it. But we'll make it."

"I want to go now," said Alvaro, softly. "Take my chances, you know."

The others glanced at Alvaro and moaned, "Not again," in unison.

"We've discussed this before, Alvara," said Jack, patiently.

"Alva-*RO*, man!" snapped Alvaro, eyes blazing. "You make me *look* like a woman and make me *fuck* like a woman but you can't make me *be* a woman! I . . . AM . . . A . . . MAN!"

Jack crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. "You'd rather be a starving faggot with a mangled cock—like you were when I found you?"

Alvaro shook his head. "Jesus, Jack, you always throw that up to me. You know I'm grateful, but why didn't I get an option?" He turned to the group. "You bitches ever think of that? If Harwin can make a snatch, he could make a cock too, man—skin grafts, *something*."

Harwin was feeling no pain from the liquor. "It wasn't possible," he said. "I told you before why it wasn't. Christ, don't Puerto Ricans get taught anatomy?"

Alvaro bristled. "Watch it, Doc."

"If you want," continued Harwin, "we'll graft your left hand there . . . "

"Okay," said Jack.

" . . . or maybe a fucking coyote's tail!"

"Okay!" intervened Jack, again.

"I still don't buy it," said Alvaro, stubbornly.

Jack became ruffled. "You're not in a position *not* to buy it." He walked up to the tall transsexual and looked unblinkingly into his eyes. "Like I said before, we stick together. One of us goes away from the group, they go *against* the group. They become a *threat*."

There was a moment of icy silence, then Jack walked away. He sat on a barstool, facing the group. "You all owe me. Ever since the Feds rounded you all up, I've been your only friend. And when I found you in the cold next to that tank, all bloody and dehydrated, it was old Jack here who saved your asses. You're all beautiful women now, and I believe most of you like the change. You're no longer half *anything* and you get more dick than you ever did before."

All but Alvaro chuckled.

"Bobby said that we were off limits to Alliance troops," said Cindy, changing the subject.

"That's right, but I don't think it'll last too long," said Jack, suddenly startled by a sound from the front door.

They heard heavy, irregular footfalls from outside the front entrance, and all eyes turned in that direction. Jack ran around to the back of the bar and pulled his pistol from underneath.

Moonfinch staggered inside, carrying an unconscious woman. He opened his mouth to say something, but his face paled and he collapsed.

V

TROUBLE AT IBAPAH JACK'S

1

The Following Night

It was hot and dusty in spite of the gentle winds. The sun had slipped behind the western horizon and, as usual, everyone had silently and routinely wished that they could follow it. Cindy, Tina and Alvara were dressed for business; exotic electronic dance music pulsed through a battery of speakers at the corners of the module—just in case Captain Herrera had been bluffing. But the troops never came, and Jack, manning the bar, eventually gestured for the others to call it a night. As Cindy,

Tina and Alvaro walked to the other module, he absently turned down the volume of the music from a control station behind the bar. Harwin sat in front of him, staring into a near-empty glass of bourbon.

"How's the little blonde?" asked Jack, pouring another drink for Harwin.

"Okay." He sighed. "Lost a lot of blood, but Tina and Alvara had the same blood type." With trembling hands, he lifted his drink and took a gulp. "They really worked her over. Repeatedly raped and slugged her. She'll be okay, though."

"Where's the Indian? Has he said anything yet?"

"Nope. Maybe he's a mute."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Maybe he's trouble. I've got to take that Toro away from him."

"He keeps trying to see the blonde. I think he's got the hots for her."

"Did you find out how they hooked up?"

Harwin shifted and crossed his legs atop the adjacent bar stool. "The blonde says he saved her ass from a bunch of American paratroopers near Salt Lake City. Seems she was a guinea pig at the Wasatch Medical Facility, but she escaped before they could do too much. Stole a truck and drove it into the ground. Gutsy broad."

"Wasatch," mulled Jack. "Is that the one near Tooele?"

"Yeah. Just northeast of where we were and about twenty miles east of where Alvara, Cindy and Tina were. Anyway, this Indian comes from nowhere and cuts everybody in two with his Toro, then he carries the girl on horseback practically across Utah. His horse broke a leg about five miles east of here, I guess."

Jack tensed. "Why would he head here and not the Alliance front?"

Harwin shook his head. "I don't know. He was just trying to reach the front, according to the girl. No one knows about our setup in the pit. How could they? Hell, even the girls don't know."

Jack felt an acute sense of anxiety. "You can't see this place until you're right on top of it, Har. Maybe he knew where he was going . . . I don't trust the motherfucker."

"Relax, Jack. He's just a lost Indian." He smiled as Jack relaxed his jaw muscles. "So what do you think of the blonde?"

Jack smiled lecherously. "Nice, but isn't she a lesbian? She must have done something to get thrown into that hellhole."

"She says she's bi. Anyway, since when has anything stopped you when you wanted a piece of ass?" Harwin toasted Jack and took another gulp.

"Good point," said Jack, his smile fading. "By the way, have you done those Cythrax tests?"

Harwin recrossed his legs and smiled smugly. "Let the Mexicans send in their health officers. We're clean as a whistle."

"How about Bobby?" He gestured toward the glory hole in the cubicles. That fucker consumes a quart of dick juice a day, for crissakes."

"I thought of that. He was pissed, but I tested him anyway. He's clean." He suddenly snapped his fingers. "Shit, I know what I wanted to tell you. Remember the blood tests we did on Alvara and Tina before the transfusions and surgery?"

Jack nodded.

"Remember that mysterious organism in Alvara's blood one day and gone a week later? Well, Herrera gave me some Alliance health data last week, and it had a picture of that same organism. It was the White Flu virus antibody."

Jack looked confused. "Wait a minute. Alvara's three-quarters black."

Harwin looked toward the women's module. "She was one of the original carriers," he said, a chill enveloping him all over again. "She must have been injected in New York before she got sent to the camp."

Jack shuddered. "How long do you think she was infectious?"

"I don't know. All I know for sure is that she wasn't infectious a week after she got here."

Jack's face became ashen. "Jesus, she could have infected us that first week she was here. If her blood had spurted into our eyes . . . . She couldn't still be—"

"No. It's gone, according to the Alliance health data," said Harwin, reassuringly. "Besides, no one's getting it any more. It was designed to die out, apparently."

Both men stared at the wall in pensive silence.

Jack finally spoke. "And they never tested in the camps, so . . . " He looked at Harwin to see if he was thinking the same thing.

"She doesn't know."

Jack whistled at the implications. "You gonna tell her?"

Harwin sighed heavily. "I don't hate her *that* much. Jeez, as promiscuous as she was . . . " He whistled. "Doris Death." He laughed sarcastically. "She's famous and doesn't even know it."

Jack also sighed and poured himself and Harwin another drink. "Well, it's a relief that no one has Cythrax. I'd hate to have to waste one of those bitches. If it was anyone, I'd hoped it would be Alvara. And speaking of Alvara, if she doesn't get off her high horse soon, we'll *alter* her attitude."

A burst of wind rushed into the room as Moonfinch came through the front entrance. Quickly, he closed the door and nodded a shy greeting at Jack and Harwin.

"Gettin' windy out there, ain't it?" said Jack,

noticing that the Indian still wore his weapon.

As the Apache hobbled toward the nearest barstool, Jack approached him, wondering if the man was as nervous as he looked. "How's the ankle now?"

Moonfinch nodded and smiled as he sat down.

"I hear you're not much of a talker," said Jack, resting his elbows on the bar across from him, "so I'll make this short and sweet. Either you tell me who you are or you're going out the door pretty quick like."

"My name is Moonfinch," he said at length, his voice raspy but pleasant.

Jack feigned exaggerated relief. "Ah, you *can* talk . . . Moonfinch, huh? What kind of name is that?

The Indian glanced at Harwin, then back at Jack. "It's a small silver bird, seen only by my people. My father saw one the night I was born. It's a custom."

Jack chuckled. "Yeah, I've heard of that. It was a punch line of a joke I heard once. This Indian dude's name turned out, 'Two Dogs Fucking.'"

The Indian stared icily at Jack. "Yeah, I heard the joke too."

Jack stood and crossed his huge arms. "Well, Moonfinch, we all appreciate what you did for the girl. She's gonna be fine, thanks to you."

"I'm glad," said Moonfinch softly.

"She'll really come in handy."

The Apache's eyebrows rose but he said nothing.

"So how long you plan on staying?" asked Jack, glancing toward Harwin.

Moonfinch followed Jack's glance with suspicion. "I'll only be here a few days if you can put me up. After the swelling goes down on my ankle and the girl's better, I'll move into the desert."

Jack frowned. "Why the desert?"

"To wait for someone."

It was Jack's turn to be suspicious. "Here? They're coming here?"

"Yes." The Indian half-smiled. "Soon."

Jack studied the young man, creating a brief period of silence. He knew that he had to know what the Indian knew. "Okay, you can do some odd jobs around here. Know what this place is?"

"No."

"This is a whore house, son—a bordello." He smiled at Harwin. "Cathouse."

Moonfinch smiled and looked around the room. "I understand."

"So you'd best heal real soon and get on your way, *comprende* ?"

"I understand," he said softly, his dark eyes projecting a bizarre combination of friendliness and fearlessness.

2

Three Nights Later

Bobby was sitting in semidarkness at a table in the bar when Jack joined him. To Jack, he looked like a man whose mind was racing at a dizzying speed; his nerves appeared frazzled.

"You ready?" Jack soothed.

"Yes." Bobby shuddered.

Jack looked at his watch. "Better get inside the cubicle. Can you do it?"

Bobby suddenly smiled impishly. "It'll cost you, Jack. You know that."

Jack shook his head forlornly. "Jesus, Bobby, you scare the shit out of me. Aren't you taking this seriously?"

"Let me do it my way, okay? Right now I just want to think of the reward. Remember our deal?"

Jack waved his hand impatiently. "Okay, okay. It's no big deal. You've sucked my dick before."

Bobby's jaw dropped. "You son-of-a-bitch . . . you knew all along." A lecherous smile slowly formed on his lips.

"Bobby, damn it!" Jack yelled impatiently. "Can you go through with it?"

The grin faded and Bobby became serious again. "I can do it." He stood and walked stiffly to the cubicle with the hole, retrieving a huge hunting knife from atop the bar.

Harwin came from the men's quarters carrying a cassette tape. He placed it into the player behind the bar. "This is the kind of music they played in the cubicles back in the late nineties. Really weird stuff." He glanced with concern at Bobby as he disappeared inside the cubicle.

"That's what he likes," said Jack. "Where're the girls and the Indian?"

"The girls just started playing Canasta. The door's locked just in case. The blonde is off somewhere with the Indian, but they won't be able to get in here."

"That fucking Indian's next," growled Jack. "The blonde belongs to me."

There was a faint knock at the front entrance; Jack motioned for Harwin to leave. "Make sure that no one comes back here," he whispered.

Harwin quickly started the music and rushed toward the men's quarters, closing the door behind him.

"Coming!" yelled Jack, glancing at the cubicle and walking to the door.

Jack opened the door and fell back at the sight of Herrera, who was wearing a surrealistic pair of night vision goggles. "Jesus!" shouted Jack.

The captain laughed. "I drove without lights." He entered cautiously, then smiled as he saw that the place was empty. "*Cabron*. Got the whole place to myself. No one fucking in the cubicles?" He absently placed the goggles on top of the bar.

"No one. Anyone know you're here?" asked Jack, silently locking the door again and ushering the captain to a table.

"You crazy? You're still off limits, man. Who's behind the wall tonight?" He quickly shook his head and held up his hands. "No. No, don't tell me. Let me guess."

The two men smiled broadly at one another, then the captain checked out the room as he danced slightly to the music.

"I thought I'd make it interesting." Jack handed Herrera an inhaler. "This shit is something else, man. Makes your dick bigger."

Herrera took it in his hand. "What is it, a popper? Shit, man, I ain't had one of these since ninety-one!"

"Similar, only a lot more powerful. I mixed it myself." Jack walked behind the bar. "Have fun. I'll just be at the bar doing my books, okay?"

The captain grunted as he thrust his crotch forward. "What if I wear the bitch out?"

"Then I'll send in another one."

The captain nodded and sat at a table, studying the inhaler. He glanced up hungrily at the cubicles. The music swelled. He unscrewed the top of the inhaler and took a deep sniff.

Jack watched him out of the corner of his eye. *Popper, my ass,* he thought. *If I'd found a nerve gas cylinder, you'd be dead right now. But this concoction should make you vulnerable enough. That shit you just inhaled is made up of one of the strongest hallucinogenics, plus one hell of an aphrodisiac.* He thought of the time when he, Bobby and Harwin had tested it one night. All three of them had written down what they experienced, and each man had experienced almost the same reactions. *Okay, asshole, suddenly, colors will seem more brilliant, and you'll sense exotic scents in the air. You'll feel wonderful, fearless, hot. Your cock will become so hard that it will hurt. You'll feel a burning at the head of your dick . . . .*

Herrera's face took on an expression Jack had never seen on a man before. He was instantly a different man and appeared insane. Oblivious to Jack, the Mexican officer quickly disrobed, shaking his dark cock at the hole. He danced toward the cubicle, stroking his cock and licking his lips grotesquely. Staring at the hole, he shook his cock and whispered something that Jack couldn't hear. In response, Bobby's tongue stretched out for Herrera's cock, but the officer pulled back teasingly. "You want it? You want it? Tell Daddy how bad you want his dick."

Jack suddenly panicked as he imagined Bobby answering Herrera with his obviously male voice. *Surely he's not that stupid . . . .*

Herrera flexed his cock up and down just out of reach of Bobby's tongue. "Tell Daddy!" he barked.

Just as Jack reached for a paring knife to do the job himself, Herrera suddenly shoved his cock through the hole.

"Oh, shit, baby," moaned Herrera. "Goddamn, honey, eat that cock. Eat Daddy's cock!" With his cock and balls now through the hole, he fucked the door savagely, cracking the plywood. As his feet danced, he snorted a warning that his cum was in transit. The door cracked more.

Jack feared that the door would disintegrate and expose Bobby holding the knife. Worse, he feared that Bobby had gotten so carried away that he'd forgotten why he was there in the first place.

Herrera whimpered and licked the door, drooling saliva. He reached weakly for the top of the cubicle to hold himself up.

And that is when Jack heard the sickening, cracking thud.

Herrera gasped and pulled away from the wall, crumpling to his knees. A bloody knife blade retreated back into the enclosure from a spot even with where his chest had been. The captain looked up at the broad smear of blood, then turned and attempted to focus on Jack.

"Jack?" His voice was weak. *"Amigo?"* He cried softly, then coughed.

As Bobby opened the door to the cubicle, Herrera fell forward, his face coming to rest on Bobby's right shoe. Bobby recoiled and vomited in the corner.

An awesome sense of guilt enveloped Jack and he felt compelled to save Herrera's life. Involuntarily, he rushed to the cubicle and felt for a pulse in the captain's neck, but the carotid artery was silent. Feeling suddenly ill, he glanced at Bobby, who was wiping his face with his sleeve and staring at Herrera's body.

"No," Jack scolded himself, backing away.. *You were a threat, amigo. Maybe not this week, but maybe next week or next month. You would have fucked us, Captain. And you'd be checking for my pulse.*

Jack picked up the goggles and went to get Harwin to help with the burial.

3

Meanwhile, Nearby In The Desert

In spite of an occasional jab of pain, she walked carefully with a slight limp, a serene smile radiating from her face. Moonfinch strolled by her side, his own limp almost gone. He was enthralled with her but concerned that perhaps he shouldn't have allowed her to walk so far. After all, she had lost quite a bit of blood and was still weak. He gestured for them to reverse direction and head back to the modules.

She stopped, staring at convoy lights in the distance. She looked up for the moon and, finding it, shuddered and held herself. She remembered staring at the moon while one man after another had assaulted her. She thought of how she had found some consolation by projecting herself upon the lunar surface while her body had been torn, scratched and impaled.

"Is Mona your real name?" asked Moonfinch.

She gave him a fond look, then turned and started back for the camp. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

He chuckled. "It's a very sensual name."

She wrinkled her nose. "It is?"

"I knew a girl once. Her name was Pomona Mona." He smiled and looked down at his feet. "She . . . uh . . . was pretty wild."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. It sort of, well, *colored* that name from then on."

She laughed lustily. "Well now, that leaves me in sort of a quandary. I mean, do I come on sweetly with chastity and try to . . . change the image?" She suddenly looked at him hotly. "Or, do I seduce you and *really* color the name for you?"

The remark stunned him and brought an immediate, raging erection. "Oh, God, lady, don't do that to me." He slowed his already slow gait. "I've been in this awful desert for months and haven't even had a wet dream."

She bumped into him playfully. "You haven't, huh?"

His expression turned serious as he pulled away from her. "Don't lead me on, Mona. You aren't in any shape to handle this animal, so don't rattle his cage."

She studied him at length. "Sorry. I guess I just feel so relaxed around you. I trust you." She nuzzled up close to him. "Just because I was raped by a bunch of guys doesn't cancel everything out. I mean, they were the sheriff's boys, but you're Robin Hood."

He swallowed hard and held her closely.

"I can take care of you in other ways," she said.

"I can wait," he said, breathlessly.

"I can do it now, right here."

"No, please." He turned and tenderly kissed her on the lips.

She seemed to wilt in his arms. "Don't stop, Moonfinch. I haven't had any affection in years."

He kissed her again, longer and deeper, their tongues entwined like mating snakes. "Oh, Jesus." Entranced, he stared at her and backed away.

"What's wrong?" she asked, alarmed.

He took several deep breaths and cleared his throat. "I almost came."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

"Okay," he said, embarrassed. "I'm okay now."

"Oh you poor boy," she said, shaking her head sadly.

Making sure no one saw him, Moonfinch slipped into Mona's room. Quickly, Mona unbuckled his jeans and went down on him.

"Oh, God, Mona," he gasped. "I can't hold it."

She came up for air. "Don't try," she said breathlessly, swallowing him again.

He grunted and bent his knees, gently yet firmly holding her head still while his jissom pulsed out like blood from a severed artery. His legs became wobbly and he crumpled to his knees, pushing her head to the floor.

She swallowed, savoring the aftertaste as he drew her head up to his. He kissed her deeply, tasting his essence on her tongue.

For the first time in his life, he retained an erection after climax. As they were lying in bed, she gently guided his long, dark cock into her still sensitive, moist chamber and clamped on it until its nectar spilled into her again and again.

At the same time, Harwin and Jack buried Herrera near the generator while Bobby silently wept nearby.

4

Jack sat rigidly inside the truck, his hands nervously gripping the steering wheel. Watching as the tail lights from the Alliance patrol truck disappeared over a distant hill, he sighed and let his hands fall into his lap. "Okay, they've gone. That was too close."

Bobby struggled up the steep slope of the ravine, glancing back down at Herrera's overturned vehicle. Reaching the top, he gazed toward the hill where the patrol had been. He looked up at the nearly-full moon and shook his head in amazement.

"I can't believe it," said Jack, following Bobby's gaze. "They must be blind not to see us." Somehow, he sensed that Bobby was on the verge of reacting to what he'd done. "How do you feel?"

Bobby slowly turned to face him. "How am I supposed to feel?"

Jack patted the passenger seat. "Come on and get in. We have to get back before someone sees us."

Bobby climbed into the truck as Jack started the engine. Both looked down once more into the ravine at Herrera's truck.

"There ain't no blood," said Bobby.

"So?" Jack started for the bordello twelve miles away. "They'll think he wasn't hurt and started back on foot."

"No footprints."

"The ravine is hard as a rock, Bobby."

Bobby suddenly looked hungrily at Jack. "How about my treat?"

Jack recoiled and looked away from him. "I'm hardly in the mood right now, Bobby."

Bobby smiled and nodded an I-thought-so expression. "I took him, you know."

"Took who?" mumbled Jack, his mind racing with a multitude of details.

"I took him." He smiled. "Herrera. I swallowed his load right before I stabbed him."

"God, Bobby! Shit!" Jack felt nauseated.

"It tasted . . . Jesus, it tasted . . . so *potent*, you know. Just like I always thought you . . . ."

"Shut up!" Jack spat, then tried to tone down his reaction. "Let's . . . let's ahh . . . I'm sorry, Bobby. I'm just on edge." He tried to smile.

"I feel funny, Jack," said Bobby, softly, as if on the brink of crying.

Jack searched Bobby's eyes and realized that he was near breaking down. "Hey, guy." He gently massaged the younger man's neck. "Bobby, you're gonna have to get hold of yourself. We can't let the others know."

Bobby looked pitifully at Jack, his lips slightly trembling.

"We can't trust Alvara, and the others might panic. Worse, Herrera's men'll be snooping around, looking for him. Bobby, you're gonna have to get your shit together."

"Then give me what you promised me." The statement was neither threatening, nor pleading, but it was emphatic.

"Later."

"I killed a man for you."

"Knock it off," said Jack, becoming angrier. "You killed him for all of us." He glared at Bobby. "You saved your own ass, too."

"Me? Noble? Fuck, Jack . . . I did it because I love you, man." His voice began to quaver. "I suck your cock in my dreams and, Lordy, it puts me on another planet."

Jack's stomach churned, then a tiny charge of electricity tingled up from his groin. He fought it, but Bobby's strange stare made it heighten. He stopped the Jeep and listened carefully for any other sound. "It'll have to be quick, Bobby," he said, his cock suddenly surging to full erection.

Bobby quickly got out of the Jeep. "There's another two hours of night." He walked toward an outcropping of smooth sandstone rocks, looking back once with a burning resolve.

Jack reluctantly followed, concerned that the Alliance patrol could spot them in the moonlight. A coyote howled in the distance and he shuddered, yet the throbbing in his crotch only got worse. When he reached the base of the rocks, he noticed that Bobby had climbed to the top, twenty feet above the desert floor. He began to climb, grumbling.

He saw Bobby lying on the huge rock, staring at the moon and massaging his exposed, erect cock. Bobby quickly got up as Jack approached. "We're at the top of the world, Jack, just you and me, the way I always dreamed. No pussy for miles, just my hot mouth. No distractions. And you're wide awake now. No games."

Jack scanned the panorama, then spied the moon above the western horizon. He struggled to take out his thick cock, but Bobby stopped him.

"Let me see you nude in the moonlight. Please, Jack . . . please."

Jack stared at him and opened his mouth in preparation for saying, *No fucking way,* but he felt a surge of excitement throughout his body. As if entranced, he began to unbutton his shirt.

"Oh, yes," hissed Bobby. "Ohhhhhhhh, fucking, yesssssssss."

Jack took off his shirt and shuddered as his hot skin met the cool night. His forest of chest hair sprang forth; his massive arm and chest muscles rippled. He unzipped his trousers and let them fall to the ground, then pulled down his shorts. As he raised each leg, Bobby pulled on the cuffs and soon had the trousers and shorts all the way off.

Bobby leaned back in awe of the fat cock that swayed in front of his eyes. "No one has your electricity . . . your . . . your *danger*. I'd like to die with your sweet nectar in my stomach."

Jack felt a sense of power and dominance. He stood on his toes, pumping his leg muscles, luring Bobby's touch. He made two huge fists and flexed his arms, enticing Bobby's trembling hands up his torso.

"I've lived for this night," Bobby whispered. "Oh, God, how I've lived for tonight."

Jack milked the pre-cum from his cock, the liquid seeping from the slit like honey bleeding from

a comb. It oozed down to meet and coat Bobby's eager tongue. He grabbed the base of his cock and slapped Bobby sharply across the face and neck.

"Yeah, baby. Yeahhhhhhh," purred Bobby, rising slowly and welcoming additional slapping across his shoulders and chest.

Jack lifted his huge ball sac and let it fall on Bobby's forehead, then allowed it to slide down his face.

Bobby's tongue fluttered over the bull-like balls; he fought the urge to cry out. He didn't dare touch his own cock for fear that he would climax.

"Take 'em out," ordered Jack breathlessly.

Bobby took out both full dental plates, placing them inside his shirt pocket.

Jack grabbed the back of Bobby's head and eased his swollen cock down the slick, pulsating throat. "Harwin's got magic hands. When you were near dying on the operating table, he swore he'd turn your mouth into the best pussy for miles," he said breathlessly, now grinding his crotch into Bobby's face. "I never thought *I'd* be trying it out, though."

Bobby expelled the cock and marvelled at the profusely oozing pre-cum.

Unable to hold back, Jack rammed his cock into Bobby's throat, pulling hair in a frenzied crescendo. A coyote yelped again from far away. As Jack's fluids began to rush through his groin, the coyote howls sounded like they were swirling around him. Suddenly, a wail seemed to be coming from his own throat and he began to shake violently. A feral howl preceded his thunderous climax, silencing the coyotes in the distance, causing the marauding of even the tiniest predators to cease.

VI

THE BATTLE OVER MONA

1

The Following Morning

Moonfinch and Mona noisily walked into the mess hall, the Indian with the automatic rifle slung over his shoulder. Alvaro was on his way out of the kitchen to clean up the buffet table and get it ready for lunch.

"Looks like breakfast is over," said Mona, lifting the lid of every tray.

"Too late for breakfast, honey," said Alvaro, joining her.

"It's only ten-thirty," said Moonfinch. "The fast food joints always served breakfast until eleven."

Mona grimaced. "Nothing. Zilch!" She watched as Alvaro began to stack up the trays.

"Bet there's some coffee." Moonfinch took two cups and filled them from the coffee urn.

Mona took the cup he offered and sipped it. "God, I'm starved!"

"You only got an hour and a half until lunch." Moonfinch sat and gestured for Mona to do likewise.

Alvaro stopped and looked at Moonfinch, smiling. "You know, I've seen you somewhere, but I just can't put my finger on it. Can I ask you a personal question?"

The Indian glanced at Mona and shrugged, returning Alvaro's rare, engaging smile. He was sure that he'd seen Alvaro, too. "Sure."

"I'm a bird lover," confessed Alvaro, " and for the life of me I can't figure out what a 'moonfinch' is. I know about goldfinches and purple finches and rosy finches, but not moonfinches."

Moonfinch laughed. "It's a long story."

Alvaro continued loading trays. "I'd like to hear it sometime—I have this thing about birds, going back a long time. One day this Mexican lieutenant didn't have any money, so he gave me this field book on North American birds." He chuckled, then noticed Mona's increasingly impatient look. "I'm really fascinated by finches, though. We see a lot of goldfinches out this way, along with house finches. They make such nice sounds. I guess the war confuses them." His expression darkened. "What little vegetation there was has been burned away, and they come here begging for food. I give them all the scraps and so they keep coming back, winter and summer." He brightened slightly. "My favorite finches are those little colorful ones with the red beaks. You only see them in pet stores and aviaries. They're not in the book so I guess they come from South America some place. They make a reedy, sweet sound." His expression was almost like an enchanted little girl as he smiled at both of them.

Moonfinch was fascinated with Alvaro. In addition, the familiarity became stronger as the subject of birds was brought up. He vaguely remembered a prisoner sitting on the edge of a draw inside a fenced compound, talking to birds. *But that was a man, not a woman.* "I don't think I ever heard one."

"Not even a moonfinch?" asked Alvaro, carrying the trays into the kitchen.

The Indian winked at Mona, who seemed unsure if she should be jealous or not.

"Are you the chief cook and bottle washer?" he asked loudly of Alvaro.

Alvaro stuck his head back out the kitchen door. "This week I am. Next week it's Tina." His head disappeared. "See you at lunch time. You like chicken pot pie?"

"Love it!" yelled Mona, holding her stomach. "My stomach wants it now." She held the coffee in

both hands and smiled at him. "I really enjoyed last night. I feel that I know you now."

"So did I."

"I think I'm in love with you." She said it cheerfully and didn't seem to care about what his reaction would be.

He almost dropped his coffee. "No, you're not. How could you be?"

She laughed, her eyes bright with happiness. "I *know* I'm in love with you."

He squirmed in his chair. "Mona, I . . . I can't stay here much longer. I have to leave."

"Then I'll go with you."

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"You just can't." He panicked at the thought of being stuck with her.

"There must be a reason." Her smile began to fade to a pout.

"I told you. I'm waiting for my father, and I have to wait for him in the desert."

"So?" A painful expression came to her face.

"Mona, it could take weeks, and I have to live off the desert. And this desert can't support two people together. No telling what I'll have to eat."

"So stay *here*. Wait for your father here." She was on the verge of tears.

He got up and walked to the window overlooking the courtyard. Outside, he could see Jack, Harwin and Bobby talking somberly. "I can see in Jack's eyes that he doesn't want me here." He returned to where she was sitting. "Besides, I have to stay lean and in tune with myself, and my father wouldn't like me staying in a place like this."

"It's me, isn't it?" she asked softly.

"That too." He sighed deeply, an ambivalence creeping over him. "If I thought you were in danger here, I'd let you come along, but I know they'll take good care of you."

"God, are you naive," she said, as if she found it hard to believe. "You really don't know what's up, do you?"

"That this is a whore house? Of course."

She laughed caustically. "And Cindy, Tina and Alvara are just hookers, right?"

He looked down at her dumbly. "What are they?"

"Transsexuals."

He sat down, stunned. "I don't understand. Why would all of them be transsexuals?"

"They were gay guys who were rounded up during that purge when the Cythrax epidemic got out of hand. They were in camps like I was. Those who weren't executed or who didn't die of starvation were experimented on—some even mutilated." She looked around to make sure that no one was eavesdropping. "I don't think the girls here remember much about their surgery. I don't even know if it was done here or somewhere else. I've looked all over the place and I don't see any evidence of medical equipment, except in that dinky dispensary where they treated us. Have you?"

He shook his head and whistled softly .

"Most Americans were never aware of the camps and the torture because it took place out here in the middle of nowhere."

"So that's what those camps were. Jesus, I saw them, but I didn't know that all those guys were . . . ." Bits of information surfaced from his memory and he felt entranced. And then he remembered where he'd seen Alvaro. Finally his eyes focused on her. "But why were *you* in one?"

She hesitated, then sighed with resignation. "I'm sort of gay, in a way. I guess you could call me bisexual." She wished she could have let it lie. "I lived with a girl and, of course, we were fingered by some neighbors when the frenzy started."

He held up his hand. "Wait . . . wait just a minute." He shook his head. "I don't understand. You're a *lesbian* ?"

She looked away from him in despair. "When Cythrax caught hold, all reason went out the door. Hell, everyone was catching Cythrax, but they decided to blame homosexuals and bisexuals in general, like they did with AIDS." She timidly glanced at him. "I guess I should tell the truth about something else." She swallowed hard. "To make ends meet, I was a prostitute on the side. My roommate, Alice . . . she put me up to it."

All the revelations numbed him, leaving him with a feeling of indifference. "I suppose that Jack will expect you to do it for him . . . if he knows."

"He knows," she almost whispered. "I told Bobby. He's the one who filled me in on the girls." She cleared her throat and sounded more assertive. "But that's not what I want now. I want you."

Moonfinch paused for several seconds, letting it all sink in. "Maybe you just want a ticket out of here. I can understand your being grateful for my saving your life, but I can't believe that you've fallen for me after just one roll in the hay."

Her face reddened with embarrassment and anger. "Asshole." She got up and poured more coffee. "So go! I didn't want to eat snakes and bugs anyway."

He turned and watched her with amusement. "Hey, don't get pissed. I'm just being skeptical." He smiled wryly. "Hell, maybe I *am* that good, but I just need convincing."

She glared at him. "Don't fucking *toy* with me, *Cochise*." Her hands shook, spilling the coffee.

With his pistol stuffed inside his belt, Jack quietly entered the room unnoticed.

"Not bad," said Moonfinch. "I sort of like

your bitchy side."

Mona threw her cup and saucer at the Indian, storming past Jack, who looked at her hungrily. Further annoyed at Jack's lecherous look, she ran toward the women's quarters, then stopped. Sensing a confrontation, she quietly walked back to the entrance.

Moonfinch slumped in his chair, drying off the coffee with a napkin. "Fuck you, too," he mumbled, halfhearted, after Mona.

Jack walked to the coffee urn, but Moonfinch ignored him. Pouring a cup of coffee, he took it to the table and, with a swagger, pulled a chair around and sat in it backwards, facing the Indian. "Where did you and the blonde go last night?"

Moonfinch slowly lifted his eyes to meet Jack's. Both men looked menacingly at one another, then the Indian noticed the pistol.

"I don't believe that's any of your business." He looked down into his coffee.

Jack smiled smugly. "Oh, I *definitely* think it is. All these girls here belong to me, including the blonde."

"Don't you think that's up to her?"

"Does she have a choice? I need another girl and she's an experienced fox. We're in the middle of nowhere with no place for her to go . . . and there's a war going on . . . *and* you're about to depart without her. So I don't think she *has* a choice."

The younger man looked up at Jack squarely. "Shit, man. If I wanted to take her, there's nothing you or your faggot assistants could do to stop me."

"Tough sonofabitch, aren't you?" Jack growled.

"You got that right . . . *Jacky Boy*."

The sound of the name caused the hair on his neck to bristle, but Jack remained calm. "Tell me something. Why did you really come here?"

The change threw Moonfinch off. "I told you. Maybe you should learn to listen."

"Yeah, yeah." Jack waved impatiently. "You're supposed to meet someone here. Did someone tell you that a doctor was here?"

The Indian glared at him.

"How did you know where we were?"

The Indian stared at Jack, smiling defiantly.

"Who the fuck are you going to meet?"

"You sure do ask a lot of questions." Moonfinch's smile faded. "Maybe I have a question."

"Be my guest," said Jack, grandly gesturing with his hand.

"You, Bobby and that other dude are Americans, right?"

Jack said nothing.

"The only things here before were top secret military installations. I heard stories about medical experiments. Now Mona tells me that there were concentration camps for gays around here and that your girls are transsexuals." He looked intensely at Jack. "How did you arrange to be here just when the war started to turn?" He paused, watching Jack's eyes flash with hatred. "You dudes connected with that somehow? I mean . . . hell . . . I know you're a doctor, man."

Jack casually pulled out the pistol from inside his belt. "You're the one who asks a lot of questions."

Moonfinch smiled broadly. "Hit a nerve, huh?"

"Take the grease gun and slide it to the end of the table."

The Indian took off the automatic rifle and gently slid it toward Jack, who grabbed it and placed it on a table in back of him.

"Who are you meeting here?" asked Jack softly.

"You'll find out soon enough, cocksucker."

"Stand up," ordered Jack.

Moonfinch stood slowly, smiling down at Jack.

"Move over there and drop your pants." Jack nodded toward the service table.

Moonfinch's expression suddenly became less defiant. "Why?"

"Hey, you dumb fuck!" yelled Jack, causing the Indian to flinch. "You think I won't blow your head off?"

The Indian moved to the service table and unbuttoned his jeans.

"Face the table!" Jack roared.

Moonfinch glanced back, then dropped his pants.

"Take a wad of butter there and smear it on your asshole."

The young man laughed nervously. "You gotta be kidding." He partially turned.

Jack clicked the hammer back and stood up. "Say another word and I'll lose the urge and just shoot you."

The Indian turned back, dipped his hand into a bowl of separated butter and, with rage-shaking hands, smeared it onto his sphincter.

"I got about the thickest dick this side of the Mississippi, boy, and it's about to glide right up to your liver." His voice was more seductive than threatening.

"Don't do it, Jack," Moonfinch said tersely. "Don't do it." He'd completely lost his bravado and there was an edge of panic to his threat.

"Who are you meeting here, then? And how did you know to come here?"

"I warn you, motherfucker. Don't do it!" It was almost a plea.

Jack picked up a catsup bottle and placed it

against Moonfinch's trembling buttocks. Holding the pistol barrel next to the Indian's head, he probed with the bottle top.

Moonfinch whirled around and struck Jack's hand with an upward motion, causing the gun to discharge into the ceiling and fall to the floor. Simultaneously, he grabbed the first object he felt on the table and jabbed it into Jack's left eye. His body coiled with surging adrenaline, he watched for what seemed like minutes as the blood-covered fork slipped out of Jack's eye and fell with a tinkle to the floor, bouncing three times. Grabbing his Toro and pulling his pants up, he stared into Jack's panic-stricken right eye and found it odd that the big man could suddenly look so vulnerable.

Mona approached in a wide arc around Jack's screaming, writhing form. She looked pleadingly at Moonfinch as he slung the automatic rifle across his shoulder. Without looking at her, he grabbed her by the hand and led her outside and into the desert.

Tina and Cindy heard Jack's screams and ran into the module, approaching him slowly as they saw the seriousness of his wound. Alvaro stuck his head through the doorway, then ran into the men's module, yelling for Harwin.

As Tina and Cindy stood immobile, Harwin and Bobby crashed through the double doors, swooping down around Jack, who was rolling over the floor with his hands to his eye. As Harwin began to shout orders to the others, Bobby grabbed Jack's pistol. He stared at it, then ran to the window, spotting Moonfinch and Mona running away from the complex.

"You fucking Indian bastard," Bobby mumbled, gripping the pistol.

"Bobby!" shouted Harwin, trying to subdue Jack with the help of the others. "Help us, Bobby!"

"YOU FUCKING INDIAN BASTARD!" Bobby yelled, running out the back door, firing the powerful pistol at them. He ran for the truck.

Moonfinch suddenly stopped and retaliated with the Toro, shattering the windows of the module and sending Bobby back inside for cover.

"Bobby!" screamed Harwin. "Goddamnit! Get over here and help us get Jack to the dispensary."

Bobby wept as he crawled to help.

The five of them carried Jack into the dispensary in the men's module, where Harwin injected him with a sedative. Later, he stopped the bleeding and Jack was able to sit in a chair.

2

Later That Night

As Cindy, Tina and Alvaro played cards, Harwin and Bobby secretly helped Jack downstairs for surgery.

"Are you sure that they're playing cards?" slurred Jack, already sleepy with a pre-op sedative.

"Don't worry, Jack," assured Harwin. "No one but us will ever know about the bunker."

Just as he was about to go under, Jack heard Harwin tell Bobby that all the damage seemed to be limited to the eye, that there was probably no neurological damage. He fell asleep knowing that he would awaken with only one eye; in spite of the anesthesia, he vowed to get even.

Near dawn, Jack had recovered enough to walk with assistance up the stairs and into his own room. Making sure that none of the girls were watching, Bobby locked the door to their underground secret.

VII

RETURN OF THE MEXICANS

The Following Night

Alvaro gazed through the mess hall window at the vivid sunset. He watched as a flock of small birds descended on a large rock near the generator out back, then nervously flew off into the sunset as the machine kicked on. Since he was sure they weren't finches, he made a mental note to look them up in his book. Wishing that he could follow them, he became acutely depressed and directed his attention to the task at hand. He continued to pick up dinner plates and silverware, placing them on a tray at the foot of the serving table. His eyes met stares from Cindy and Tina, who sat nearby, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. Alvaro leered, teasingly, which prompted Tina to place her finger in her nose. Cindy countered with the gesture of going down on an imaginary cock, followed by a middle finger salute.

Harwin and Bobby sat opposite one another at a table on the other side of the room. Both pensively sipped from snifters of brandy.

Harwin shook his head at the exchange of gestures among the transsexuals. "How's Jack, Cindy?"

"He was sleeping when I looked in on him about twenty minutes ago. No bleeding."

"Good." Harwin turned back to Bobby.

"Any more plates over there?" asked Alvaro sullenly.

"No," said Bobby.

Alvaro picked up the tray and started for the kitchen but stopped as another flock of birds landed on the hood of the truck. He placed the tray on a table and lit a cigarette, studying the birds.

"Another dead night . . . shit," said Bobby. "Think they'll lift the off limits soon?"

"I can use the rest," offered Tina.

Harwin glanced back at the women. "Just in case, someone be ready. Cindy?"

Cindy took a big puff from her cigarette. "You got it."

"Make sure you douche," mumbled Bobby.

"You used it all up *gargling with it*," deadpanned Cindy.

"Oh, Cindy," Bobby retorted, "you're so *femme grotesque*."

"Two years of high school French," quipped Tina, "and that's all she can muster."

Cindy leered at him. "Honey, I'm still twice the man you are and I don't even have *balls* any more."

Tina nodded toward Bobby. "Neither does *she*."

Bobby glowered at both women.

Cindy ignored the look. "Hey, Harwin. What happens when Mona and the Indian reach the Mexicans? Think they'll finger us?"

"What do *they* know?" asked Harwin indifferently.

Cindy looked at Tina with a we've-got-a-secret look. "Mona found out quite a lot, I understand."

Harwin sat up in his chair, facing Cindy and Tina. "What?"

Alvaro tore his attention away from the birds and listened to the obviously provocative conversation, disappointed that Cindy had not shared the revelation with him.

Still looking at Tina, Cindy said, "Bobby told her we were transsexuals."

Bobby bolted out of his chair and approached Cindy threateningly. "You lying, fucking *bitch* !"

Cindy watched Bobby carefully, fully coiled to retaliate. "God only knows what else he told her."

Alvaro likewise readied himself for action. He hated Bobby.

Bobby moved closer to her. "Goddamn you, *cunt* !"

Tina moved toward Bobby, whipping out a switchblade and clicking it open noisily. Her voice was soft and full of menace. "Touch either one of us and you're a dead queen, motherfucker."

He stopped and glanced nervously at the knife, then at Harwin.

Harwin looked dumbfounded. "Is this true, Bobby?"

Bobby fumbled for words. "She . . . she was in a lesbian camp, wasn't she? She was one of us, so I, you know . . . I just thought . . . ."

Harwin stared at him, his mouth open.

Bobby meekly walked to his chair and gazed sullenly out the window.

Tina put away her knife and sat, shaking with anger.

Alvaro sat down and smoked his cigarette, perversely enjoying the oppressive tension in the room.

Harwin's expression became grim. "How much did you tell her?"

Bobby looked at the floor like a scolded little boy. "Just . . . you know, that the girls were in the camps for men . . ." He sighed and looked up at Harwin with eyes that seemed about to brim over in tears. " . . . and that they had gender changes."

"You tell them who did the surgery?" Harwin's voice was almost inaudible to Alvaro.

Bobby gripped the sides of the chair and looked pleadingly at Harwin. "No. No, I didn't . . . I *swear* I didn't!

Harwin rose and looked at the others. "Did either of you say anything to her?"

"No," said Cindy.

"No fucking' way," Tina said, glancing at Alvaro. "Could it be the *bird bitch?"*

All eyes converged on Alvaro.

Alvaro felt a rush of anger. "Oh, sure, blame the . . . " He glared at Tina. " . . . *bird bitch.* That's really fucking rich." He stood and considered taking the tray into the kitchen but the anger wouldn't subside. He took another drag from his cigarette and flicked it at Bobby, hitting him on the shoulder.

Bobby brushed frantically at the ashes and stepped on the butt.

"There's your big mouth, assholes," said Alvaro, his voice dry with anger. "I didn't say shit to *anyone*." He reached for the tray. "And the next person that calls me 'bird bitch' will regret it."

As Harwin, Bobby, Cindy and Tina dumbly watched Alvaro carry the tray toward the kitchen, a truck screeched to a halt behind the module, startling them all. Presently, there were three Mexican soldiers, standing just inside the module, armed with Toro automatic rifles.

The shorter of the three, a lieutenant, was the spokesman. "Where is *Señor* Jack?"

Harwin's voice betrayed numbing fear. "Ahh, he . . . he's asleep. Recovering from an eye infection. Can I help you?"

The lieutenant gestured for the other soldiers to search the facility, and they ran off into separate directions. One ran into the courtyard to search the entertainment module across the way. Another went into the women's quarters on the left. Bobby slowly sat down, his hands trembling. One by one, Cindy, Tina and Alvaro sat down.

"Have you seen Captain Herrera the last few days?" The lieutenant studied the reaction of Harwin, then Bobby, then the others. His gaze returned to Bobby.

Harwin cleared his throat. "Why, no . . . but then we're off limits."

"I know," said the lieutenant, impatiently, " but have you seen him?"

Harwin nodded toward Bobby. "I haven't. You, Bobby?" He looked at the others. "Any of you seen Captain Herrera?"

Cindy, Tina and Alvaro all shook their heads sincerely. Bobby appeared to be ill, but shook his head convincingly.

"We have to search, of course," said the lieutenant, looking at Tina hungrily.

Tina absently glanced at his crotch.

Harwin seemed to register the lieutenant's interest. "We understand. Make yourself at home." He gestured for him to pass.

The lieutenant looked once more at Tina, then moved quickly into the men's quarters.

Harwin sat down, rubbing the perspiration off his palms.

Cindy studied the men, finally saying, "Do you two know something we don't?"

Harwin clenched his teeth, then slowly and deliberately whispered, "*Shut the fuck up.*"

Bobby reached for the bottle of brandy and attempted to pour himself a drink. He couldn't. Harwin absently poured it for him, his eyes glued to the doorway to the men's quarters. The others watched in disgust as Bobby picked up the snifter with shaky hands and gulped down the brandy.

They waited in agony. Finally, the three men appeared again, just inside the men's quarters. They stopped there and the lieutenant said something to the enlisted men in Spanish. Alvaro's eyes darted to Harwin as he comprehended.

"*Señor* !" The lieutenant looked at Harwin.

"Yes?" answered Harwin, with a voice that almost cracked. He stood.

"Could you come here, please?"

Harwin glanced at Bobby, whose face seemed void of blood, then joined the Mexicans.

"Señor, there is a locked door down the hall. Could you open it for us, please?"

"Of course," said Harwin, fumbling for his keys.

Alvaro watched as Harwin led the soldiers to the closet door and nervously unlocked the door. A trace of memory surfaced in his mind and he struggled to retrieve it. He got the impression that he had once been pushed on a gurney from the dispensary to the closet after Jack had rescued them from the bitter cold. He remembered the sensation of lying inside a casket-like enclosure, followed by the feeling of sinking. At the time, he had assumed that he had died and was being lowered into the ground. Instead, he had awakened with the genitals of a woman.

"What kind of room is this?" asked the lieutenant. "Why is it locked?" The officer walked inside, followed by Harwin.

Bobby moaned softly, drawing Alvaro's attention. And then Alvaro realized that the room was much more than just a storage closet. He stared at Bobby, who watched the activity in the hallway by peeking between his fingers. It reminded Alvaro of the times he had gone to horror movies as a kid and had shielded his eyes against the really scary parts on the screen.

The lieutenant appeared in the hallway again and briskly walked back into the mess hall, followed by an obviously relieved Harwin and the other soldiers. "Thank you, *Señor.*" He smiled broadly. "We've lifted the off-limits on your bordello, by the way."

Alvaro watched in amusement as Harwin glanced happily at Bobby, who looked as though he had just vomited.

The lieutenant looked hungrily at Tina. "As I just told the *señor*, I've been authorized to lift the ban on your place. Our troops will be returning presently."

Harwin nodded for Tina to join the lieutenant. "How about some fun on the house, Lieutenant?"

Tina and Cindy alluringly walked into the women's quarters.

"We'll just freshen up a bit, boys," sang Tina. "See you in the bar."

Harwin glared at Alvaro, who reluctantly joined the others.

The soldiers looked at each other and whistled, making their way across the courtyard and into the bar.

VIII

ONE-EYED JACK

1

The Following Morning

Jack was adrift in a dreamworld of exotic symbols and incongruous scenes.

Sensing a peaceful warmth, he felt a gentle rocking sensation. He looked up into the big brown eyes of his mother, who sang him a lullaby in Spanish. He felt a fondling sensation in his groin

and looked down at his cock, which was now its present size. Then it was Bobby who was rocking him and singing him a lullaby. Jack shoved him away, but Bobby clung to him, his lips quivering and protruding toward the cock he was determined to suck. Jack found himself running a gauntlet bordered by hundreds of men and women on their knees, all trying to trip him and suck his hard, drooling cock.

Suddenly, he was Colonel Deegan in dress uniform and medals, walking down the hallway of the research center. It was a long, empty hallway and his heel clicks reverberated. He stopped and listened, finally sensing that someone was lurking in the shadows behind him. He walked faster and heard footsteps behind him, gaining on him. He pulled out his pistol and turned to confront his enemy, but the hallway was empty and dark. And then he was alone in the middle of The Great Salt Lake Desert, staring up at the sky. A faint screaming sound reached him from miles away, then elevated in pitch at a rapid pace. From out of nowhere, a single Stealth fighter swooped down from the clouds and plowed into the salty earth, burrowing toward him like a gigantic mole.

"NO!" he yelled, awakening with his one eye bulging in terror.

"It's okay, Jack. It's okay, " soothed Alvaro, gently pushing Jack back down on the pillow. "It's a dream, Jack. You're okay. You're okay."

Jack stared at him in disbelief. "Alvara?"

"No. I'm Bobby in drag," he said dryly.

Jack grabbed his head and sat up, shuddering. "Oh *fuck*, what a goddamn dream."

"So what was it about?"

"What are you doing here?" Jack was suspicious.

Alvaro placed his hands on hips and gave his patient a sour look. "It's my shift, asshole."

Jack was taken aback. He couldn't remember the last time someone had called him an asshole.

"Well, you *are* an asshole," Alvaro insisted. "Can't we be nice to one another once in awhile?"

The big man stretched and yawned, the sleep wrinkles giving him a baby face. "Okay, I'll be nice. When do I get breakfast?"

"Soon." Alvaro crossed his arms.

Jack swiveled to get out of bed. "You can go now. I'm up."

Alvaro stood in front of him and helped him to his feet. "Harwin says that I have to stay with you in case you black out."

Jack brushed him away, heading for the bathroom. "I'm not bleeding, so there's no worry." He walked into the bathroom and urinated loudly as Alvaro watched from behind. He looked into the mirror and saw the transsexual standing behind him. "Why do you hate me?"

Alvaro smiled. "Why should I hate you? You saved my life." He shrugged. "But there are times when I sort of dislike you."

Jack glanced down and shook his cock dry.

"Then there are times when you excite the shit out of me."

Jack's hand stopped half way to the flush handle; he slowly straightened up to find Alvaro again in the mirror. Absently, he flushed the commode and turned around, witnessing an expression he'd never seen before. While the surgery was being done, Jack had admired Alvaro's body structure and basic looks. He'd been confident that the Puerto Rican would be the best, and was very disappointed when Alvaro had become surly and hostile. "Say what?"

Alvaro was amused with his reaction. "Cindy and Tina rave about you, so maybe I'm more curious than anything else." He turned and proceeded to strip Jack's bed.

The big man frowned and opened up the medicine chest, pulling out toothpaste and a toothbrush. He brushed his teeth and used a mouthwash while Alvaro put clean sheets on his bed. Spitting out the mouthwash, he leaned against the bathroom doorway and looked at Alvaro again. "You think I'm a bad motherfucker, don't you?"

"I don't know," Alvaro said coyly, fluffing up a fresh pillow. He watched as Jack pulled off his hospital gown and let it drop to the floor. As Jack got into the glass-enclosed shower and turned on the water, Alvaro moved to the doorway. "There's something evil about you, but there's something exciting, too." The Puerto Rican spoke louder, making himself heard over the sound of the shower.

"Okay, since we're spilling our guts, I have a confession to make." Jack lathered vigorously, then rinsed off. "You excite me, too, but I was always afraid you'd cut my throat." The burly man opened the glass door, exposing an erection. "Join me? Uhh . . . leave your knife behind."

Alvaro instantly felt electrically charged, yet nauseated with ambivalence. Heeding his more sordid instincts, he unzipped his dress, letting it fall to the floor, exposing his nude, female body. "Why not?" he said, hesitantly stepping into the stall with Jack.

Alvaro's altered body was firm, yet supple and rounded. Because he had refused implants, his breasts were small, but his nipples were bright red and hard. In spite of his desire to remain a man, he'd not refused the hormones and other treatments designed to transform him into a woman. It was an contradiction he was determined to manage. In order to survive, he would play the part of a female

whore. But in order to remain sane, he would hold on dearly to his mental and spiritual manhood. He could never accept the fact that his body had been permanently altered.

Jack lightly kissed Alvaro, then studied his expression. Sensing breathlessness, Jack kissed him deeply, probing the stunned mouth with an aggressive tongue. Wildly, Jack licked down to the small breasts and lightly bit each nipple. He dropped to his knees and feasted upon the surgically created clitoris, humming as he ran his tongue over the most sensitive spot—a spot he had surgically created. He concentrated on the spot until Alvaro grabbed him behind the head and fell back against the tiles.

Jack looked up wildly and growled, "I designed this pussy, baby. I helped *create* this sweet pussy!" He rose and guided his red, pulsating cock head into the sensitive orifice, his eye rolling upward in ecstasy. Holding Alvaro tightly, Jack lifted him off the floor and slowly fucked him in long, slurping strokes. Alvaro kissed Jack deeply and sucked the man's tongue inside his mouth, wishing he could swallow it. Jack pressed Alvaro high against the tile as the hot water sprayed their faces, then he buried his massive cock into the depths of the cavity. Jack's mouth flew open, then he shook violently, roaring like a grizzly bear.

Alvaro could feel Jack's hot, syrupy semen gushing into him. He envisioned myriad spermatozoa frantically searching for an egg that wasn't there; he wished that he had ovaries. Suddenly he really wanted to be a woman and knew that the reality was only as far away as his own acceptance. All he had to do was say, "I am Alvara, a woman," and he would be a complete human being.

And then Jack became cold and indifferent. "We did the best job on you . . . by far," he said, stepping out of the shower as Alvaro gently slid against the tile to a sitting position.

Lazily, Alvaro rinsed away Jack's semen and watched it swirl around the drain, finally disappearing through the holes. "Hey, Jack!"

Jack, drying himself, glanced back.

"How does it feel to fuck a man?"

A breeze of revulsion drifted over Jack, but he laughed in spite of it. "You'll never accept it, will you?"

Alvaro looked down at his crotch. "It used to be big and thick, man . . . just like yours." Tears came to his eyes. "What if someone cut your dick off, Jack? What if the tables were turned?"

Not allowing himself to consider the scenario, Jack quickly dried off and got dressed.

2

Knowing that he had to keep his head steady, Jack slowly walked into the courtyard with Cindy and Tina at either arm. He wore a patch over his left eye socket and was dressed in a robe. The women led him to a bench and sat him down gingerly.

"Easy, easy," said Jack, feigning weakness. "The *pain*."

Tina was concerned. "Does your eye hurt bad?"

Cindy chuckled. "Girl, he doesn't hurt. Can't you tell a fraud when you see one?"

Tina, with hands on hips, pretended to be indignant. "Is that true? You should be ashamed, Jack."

"Okay," said Cindy. "You sit right here while Tina and I go fix you pancakes and ham for breakfast."

Jack became wide-eyed like a child. "Yeah!"

Tina shook her head. "Doc said he wasn't supposed to have that."

"Fuck the doctor," grumbled Jack.

"Not me." Tina held up her hands. "Miss Bobby'd scratch my eyes out." She rolled her eyes, bringing a giggle from Cindy.

Cindy and Tina went into the mess module, leaving Jack alone to scan the horizon. His jaw tightened in hatred for Moonfinch.

Tina stuck her head out one of the windows. "What else do you want? Orange juice?"

"Orange juice, thanks."

Cindy came back with a cup of coffee, followed by Tina, carrying the glass of orange juice.

"*Bird Bitch* said she'd make your breakfast," announced Cindy, turning to make sure that Alvaro had not heard.

"Shit. She might poison me."

Cindy handed Jack his coffee and sat down next to him. "Don't kid yourself. She likes you, Jack."

"Bull shit," he barked.

Tina sat on the other side of him. "She's okay. It's that left over macho that's talking. She wasn't a woman trapped in a man's body like us."

Cindy looked at Jack warmly. "No kidding, Tiger, how *do* you feel?"

Jack patted their legs affectionately. "Feel great, except for some pain in the nerve from time to time."

"Doc says it didn't go in that far," said Tina. "Lucky, huh?"

He sighed. "Far enough to lose my goddamn eyesight, but thank God it didn't go past the socket into my brain."

"Hey, Jack." Tina straightened up and fluttered her eyes, grinning at Cindy. "We got a proposition for you."

Jack glanced at Cindy, then looked suspiciously at Tina. "A proposition? Uh oh, now what?"

Tina looked down demurely. "Well . . . we'd like to go with you wherever you go from here. We'd . . . ." She looked up at Cindy and giggled. "We'd like to, uh . . . stay in the business, you know? And we'd like you to be our old man."

"Like a *menage a trois* . . . sort of," added Cindy.

Jack placed his arms around both and drew them near. "You would, huh?"

"Yeah," continued Tina. "We sorta think you're special, you know?"

"Yeah," agreed Cindy. "We think you'd make a good *old man*."

Jack glanced back and forth at each. "You two gotta be crazy, you know? Good Lord, you take care of a dozen soldiers between you and still you feel like taking care of old Big Daddy here."

"Can we ask him?" asked Tina of Cindy.

"You ask him."

"Ask me what?"

"No, *you* ask him," insisted Tina.

Cindy smiled shyly. "We have a theory."

"What's that?" Jack was enjoying the silliness of the conversation for a change.

"Did you hear the joke about the plastic surgeon who hung himself?" asked Cindy.

"No," said Jack.

"That's the joke," said Cindy, rolling her eyes up. She looked at Tina and glanced down at the stocky man's crotch. "Uh . . . did Doc give you a, you know—an implant?"

Jack grabbed his crotch and laughed. "*Now* I get the joke." He shook his head. "No, this one's home grown. Whose theory was that? Alvara's?"

At that moment, Alvaro came outside, prompting Cindy and Tina to laugh.

"What's so damned funny?" Alvaro turned to Jack. "What kind of syrup on the pancakes?"

"Boysenberry," said Jack, grinning at him.

Alvaro placed his hands on his hips impatiently, but Jack's grin disarmed him. He fought back a smile as he remembered the earlier session in the shower. "We ain't got no boysenberry."

"What kind *do* we have?"

"Maple and some of that clear stuff. You know . . . the stuff movie makers used to mix with red food dye to make fake blood."

Jack nudged Cindy. "How about Karo with red food dye? Make 'em look like they're rare."

Cindy and Tina howled with laughter.

"You got it," said Alvaro haughtily, walking back inside the module.

Jack noticed that Harwin was emerging from the men's quarters. "Oh, shit," he hissed. "Here comes the grumpy old doctor."

"What are you doing here, goddamnit?" yelled Harwin, irritated. "You're supposed to be in bed. You want a fucking infection?"

"I am about to dine with a couple of ladies," offered Jack.

Cindy and Tina looked defiantly at Harwin with hands on Jack's shoulders.

Harwin regarded them and crossed his arms. He scanned the horizon impatiently. "Well, maybe the *ladies* could excuse us for a few minutes."

Jack realized that Harwin was disturbed and became serious. "Give us a couple of minutes, will you Cindy? Tina?"

Both left quietly.

Waiting until the transsexuals were out of sight, Harwin said softly," I can't sleep worrying about those troops finding the Indian and the girl."

Jack was cool. "They won't find them."

"How can you be so sure?"

Jack looked out over the desert. "If they were going to find them, they'd have done it by now and we'd be in custody." He crossed his legs and leaned back on the bench, smiling. "I'll bet a thousand dollars that the Indian won't try to go to the Mexicans. First of all, he doesn't know how tight we are with them. Number two, the Mexicans are looking for Herrera and the Indian would be a fool to let the Mexicans get that close . . . because he'll think it might be us looking for him. Number three . . . " He stood and stretched, then started walking for the mess module. " . . . he doesn't trust the Mexicans any more than we do. He's looking for another Indian."

Harwin moved in front of him. "What?"

"Let's eat breakfast."

"What Indian?" asked Harwin, perplexed.

"Don't know, but soon he won't be able to find anyone," mumbled Jack, his jaw tightening again. "I'll find the bastard."

"What?" Harwin almost stumbled, walking backwards.

Jack smiled. "The Indian can live off the land, but the bitch can't. They need blankets and water and food. He'll be back." He gently patted his eye patch. "I'm gonna find the motherfucker and get that Mona back." He smiled at Harwin. "Business is about to get real good again."

IX

MOONFINCH AND MONA, RUNNING IN CIRCLES

1

The puma sniffed the air, becoming excited at the presence of two distinct scents wafting into his

nose. One was familiar: that of easy game, eaten time and again when nothing more substantial was available. The other was exotic, yet faintly familiar. More, it belonged to something much larger—enough to feed on for several days. With heavily padded paws, he deftly followed the scent to the base of an outcropping of rocks. Silently, he climbed the highest rock and peered over the edge into a small chasm. Whimpering sounds came from behind a huge piece of jagged rock, followed by the sight of a tuft of blonde hair. Excitement coursed through his powerful, coiled body.

But something else vied for his attention; he scanned the vista, his eyes adept at seeing the faintest movement in the darkness. Another scent reached him and he became nervous. Then still another scent came from a different direction, further away. He looked once more into the chasm, licking his long, sensitive whiskers. A wise, older beast, he quickly went after the smaller game.

Mona huddled against the rock, crying softly. She stared at the dead sidewinder rattlesnake at her feet, still gripping tightly the rock she'd used to kill it.

The sound of falling rocks nearby silenced her.

"Mona?" whispered Moonfinch, climbing the narrow pathway through the rocks and carrying a blanket filled with food and supplies.

She ran to him and held him, sobbing. "I thought you'd been caught. Oh, God, I thought you were dead."

He let the bundle drop and held her. "Easy, easy." He kissed her. "They never saw me. They were all inside the saloon working a group of soldiers." He picked up the bundle and led her to an alcove where they had been hiding. "The off-limits was lifted. The place was packed." He grinned darkly. "Jack must be dead, because he was nowhere to be found. He won't be trying to fuck anyone with butter again."

"He's probably in the in bed recuperating and dreaming up something horrible for you and me." Mona shuddered as she tried to regain her composure. "I almost froze to death last night."

He released her and opened up the blanket. "This will help." He pointed to several packages and cans of food and juices. "I got some food, too."

She hungrily pulled out a package of dried apples. "Could they have followed you?"

He sat on the blanket and patted it, gesturing for her to sit down. "Those idiots couldn't track a road grader through the desert, much less an Apache who leaves no tracks. Didn't you ever go to the movies?"

She took several pieces and sat, eating with enthusiasm. "Big deal. Just don't be so overconfident. I heard some scary things about Jack. He's shrewd."

"Jack's dead."

"Are you sure? How can you be so sure?"

"I just am. I checked his room."

She was horrified. "You mean you went inside?"

He laughed. "The place was crawling with Mexican and Indian troops. I'm positive no one noticed me." A look of fierce hatred came to his face. "Besides, I wanted to finish the job in case he was in his room."

She shuddered at the expression on his face then scanned the dark horizon. "Where are we?"

He opened up a can of processed meat. "About eight miles from the camp."

"Eight miles?" She was incredulous.

"Yeah." He pulled out his knife and began to eat with it.

"*Only eight miles?*" Her mouth stayed open, exposing bits of apple. "We've walked for days!"

He smiled. "We're going around the camp in an eight-mile radius."

"We're going around in circles?"

He held up his hands. "I told you we have to meet my father. He said to meet him near this camp. He thought it would be a safe place for me to wait for him. He doesn't trust the Mexicans."

She looked suspicious. "Just who *is* your father?"

"He's a general with the Alliance," he said flatly.

"No, really. Who is he?"

He looked teasingly at her. "What I said."

She shook her head, forlorned. "Don't bullshit me. I'm tired."

"I'm telling you the truth," he said, chuckling. "He was a chief of the largest Apache nation in the Southwest and northern Mexico. He's been chosen to mobilize a big invasion into Colorado, using Mexican and American Indian troops."

She was stunned. "That's incredible."

"Isn't it?"

"Jesus, that blows my mind."

He pointed at the apples. "Eat. You need strength."

She studied him for several seconds. "What were you doing in the mountains when you found me?"

"Watching troop movements for my father. It was an easy job until they started killing Indians. Guess they caught on that the Indians were going over to the Alliance. I found out the hard way when I got shot at near one of the internment . . . ." His mouth fell open. "That's where I saw him!"

"Who?"

"Alavra . . . the cook. Remember? She was a *he* then." Moonfinch smiled fondly. "He was sitting near the fence watching birds and he must have spotted me in the brush. He was so concerned that I was going to be seen." His expression darkened. "Why did they change him like that? He didn't look gay to me then."

She shrugged. "What's your father's name?"

He smiled proudly. "General Quintero. His people call him 'Chango.'"

"And what does that mean?"

He sighed. "Depends on where you are. I heard that in Mexican slang it means 'monkey.' With my father and the Apache, it came to mean 'gorilla.' A gorilla silverback is super strong and fierce. He's also a little shy and a very dedicated father and provider—just like my father." He became serious, allowing painful memories to resurface. "There were four of us—all boys. Now there is only me and my father." He spoke softly. "My mother and brothers were killed when our reservation was bombed by mistake—just when the war first started."

"Oh, my God," choked Mona.

"My father was in Mexico, talking to the military. That's why he doesn't think it was a mistake. He thinks that the Americans found out about him and bombed it on purpose. I was jogging in the desert that morning. Normally, I ran in the early evening, but for some reason, I felt jittery—like I knew something bad was going to happen." His eyes widened with dread. "So I took our two dogs and went on a fifteen-mile run before dawn. When I got back to within three or four miles, I heard the planes high up in the sky . . . saw the bombs falling . . . ." He swallowed thick, bitter saliva. "God, they were so loud and deafening when they hit and the fire balls were so *massive* and . . . *hot*. It was like bright orange surf and it like, rolled for miles." He caught himself as he almost began to cry. "There was an entire Mexican division within twenty miles of there, but for some reason they bombed us. It *had* to be a mistake. It had to be a stupid, fucking mistake, because why would we be a more strategic target than a whole goddamn Mexican division?" He shuddered. "Everything was fused together, Mona. My brothers were huddled together under my father's bed. They were all inter . . . " His voice cracked. " . . . intertwined with the metal from the bed." He trailed off to a whisper. "I never found the body of my mother."

She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. "Moonfinch . . . I'm so sorry."

He shook the emotion off. "No. My old man loved his kids. He's the most loving, considerate person I know when it comes to me." He smiled proudly. "God help anyone who hurts me, though. The Americans have already paid a terrible price for my brothers and mother. And they'll pay dearly when the offensive starts in Colorado. You see, my father is probably the most vindictive man I've ever known. My mother was raped when I was a child and my father never reacted with any hostility we could see. Even when the police did nothing to indict the two brothers who did it, he never showed any emotion. He once told me that you should never telegraph your emotions to your enemy."

"So what happened?"

"They never found the brothers. They just disappeared. Oh, I know that my father killed them and probably buried them in the desert, but he never showed any hatred, never made a threat."

Mona shuddered. "How long have you been out . . . spying?"

"I've been gone for three months, but we've been in contact through Indian groups."

Both continued eating in silence.

"Jesus, here I am telling all to the enemy."

"Me? Enemy?" She feigned outrage. "After what they did to me?" She hit him with an empty package.

"Yeah, Harwin and Bobby fucking dead men. They'd shit if they knew who my father was."

"Where do you think they all came from?"

He put away the empty can and began to clean his knife. "Something very sinister about Jack, and at the same time . . . Oh, I don't know—maybe *magnetic* is what he is. The others were very loyal to him. My gut tells me that he and those other two guys were somehow involved in the secret experiments at the camps. Jack reminded me of a prison warden or corrupt police captain. And any doctor who can do transsexual operations must have gotten his surgery experience from one of the camps. Those operations just weren't being done by the private sector after the start of the war."

"But why would they be so loyal if Jack was one of the doctors in the camps?" She wrapped herself in the blanket and snuggled up next to him.

"They didn't know, probably. You said that the Americans had camps for junkies, gangbangers and derelicts, too. And didn't you tell me that they had smaller research facilities that didn't keep any prisoners? Jack and his boys could have been in one of those." He placed his arms around her and rubbed her arm. "They're opportunists. It all unfolded and played right into their laps. I'll bet the whore house was a field hospital before and the Yanks probably left a shit load of medical equipment behind . . . and that's how Jack and Harwin were able to do the surgery."

She shook her head in protest. "Wait a minute. Bobby and Harwin are lovers. Why didn't they end up in a camp like I did?"

"They came through the whole thing un-

scathed, didn't they?" He pulled back the blanket from her face and looked at her. "Who sponsored them? Jack, that's who. If he said they weren't queer, who's to say otherwise? Haven't you ever seen cliques operate?"

"I'm hungry."

He handed her a bag of nuts. "We've got to make it last. The fruit juice won't last another couple of days as it is. I'll have to go back for water."

She looked at him earnestly. "I want to go with you this time."

"No. It's better that I go alone."

"We could carry more water."

"No."

"No." She mocked his voice.

He smiled. "I'm invisible out there at night."

"Deceptive."

"Deceptive," he agreed.

"Magical."

"Magical, like my namesake."

"Do moonfinches really exist?" she asked childlike.

"Yes."

"Did your father really see one when you were born?"

"Not really. I just say that to people. Have you noticed a birthmark on my thigh? It looks like a small bird. My father claimed it was the elusive moonfinch and that I was destined for greatness."

"Then there's really such a thing as a moonfinch?"

He nodded emphatically. "Yes, there is. I saw one once."

"You did?" Her eyes widened.

"Uh huh. When I was nine or ten." He settled in next to her. "I was lost in the desert, staring up at the night sky, waiting for the moon to come out from behind the clouds. I was still for a long time and then I heard this small, resonate chirping sound. It sounded sort of reedy in a soothing way, like it had a couple of distinct tones. Do you know anything about music?"

"A little."

"Well, on top of the two tones was a harmonic tone created by the, uh...clashing of the first two tones. Sounds like three sounds, like a chord. Anyway, its sound was like a reedy chord. And then I saw it." He could see it again in his mind's eye. "It flew to within a few feet of my face and it just stayed there, almost like slow motion, flapping its wings, just sadly looking into my eyes." He stared at her, then bent over toward her. He kissed her lightly, then passionately.

She opened the blanket and welcomed him inside, gently and sweetly making love to him.

2

Moonfinch and Mona lay asleep, wrapped inside the blanket. Mona suddenly began to tremble and whimper as a nightmare assaulted her. Moonfinch awakened and placed his hand over her mouth, just as she cried out and bolted upward.

"Easy," he whispered. "Sound carries for miles. It's okay . . . . It's okay."

She began to weep softly. "I keep living it over and over. It'll never go away."

"Yes it will, someday." He pulled up to a large rock and sat against it.

She joined him.

"Someday, this nightmare will be over for both of us," he said, running his fingers through her hair.

In the distance, a coyote howled as the moon appeared from behind a passing cloud. A hand holding a 10 millimeter pistol entered Moonfinch's peripheral vision, the barrel coming to rest on his temple.

"*Au contraire*, motherfucker. Your nightmare is just beginning," whispered Jack, staring at the Indian through Herrera's night vision goggles. "You walked right into my little trap . . . and now you have to pay and pay and pay."

X

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MOONFINCH

1

Moonfinch stared up into the light, unable to speak or resist. Dreamily, he watched someone in surgical garb as they injected a needle into his i.v. Within seconds he lost consciousness. His life's memories resurfaced helter-skelter. All the sounds of his life played back like lips going swiftly over a massive pan flute. Neurons screamed alerts throughout his brain as a drill punched through his skull, allowing the insertion of an orthoscopic tube. Some ethereal defense mechanism struggled to keep all the memories alive, but retreated as a laser sizzled.

Only his earliest memories stayed intact, while his latest were permanently wiped away. The balance of his conscious memory became disarrayed like a loose jigsaw puzzle.

His first memory resurfaced with ultimate clarity. He could feel himself floating in a warm, wet, wonderful place—could hear a heartbeat nearby,

much stronger than his own. He began to move and panicked. *Not there*, he thought. *Not again!* Dizzily, he fell down the tube, into a cold world of bright lights and people dressed in white. He screamed and screamed, then found himself atop the bosom of a sweaty-faced woman with a faint smile. Later, two big, rough hands picked him up and he was held before the burning, proud eyes of his father.

2

The Following Night

Alvaro stood beside the window in his room, smoking a cigarette and staring out at the night sky. He wondered what things were like in Toa Baja, his home town in Puerto Rico. Fragments of memory came to him, bringing short bursts of joy. Inevitably, his sheer hunger for any form of pleasure repressed all other thoughts, and he drifted through memories of his childhood. He remembered the walk to the beach as a youngster and how that awkward, skinny boy would follow the beach up to a fancy resort hotel, finally sitting atop a bluff overlooking the pristine golf course and the crashing surf. From that vantage point, he watched the tourists play the dramatically perched green. He was always able to predict which golfers would putt badly as the thunderous surf surged into the reef below and coursed through several tunnels, shooting out of holes like a concentration of geysers. With or without the presence of golfers, he would stay there for hours, watching the gulls and other sea birds hunt. The boy so loved birds.

Rapturously, he remembered the off-season day when two older men approached the green, almost at sunset, the course virtually deserted . . . .

One of the men did not appeal to him but the other had beautiful grey hair and a well proportioned, stocky body. The sight of the man made Alvaro's pulse quicken and he experienced the first intense sexual attraction of his young life. The unattractive man's ball had missed the green and he was busy searching through dense foliage on the far side. The grey-haired man, having placed his ball squarely on the green, ambled toward the unseen Alvaro with his putter in hand.

Looking both ways, he pulled out his penis and began urinating. Not more than twenty feet away, Alvaro held his breath and recorded the man's image forever in his memory. His eyes were light blue, his face wholesome and friendly looking, like that of a benevolent priest. His burly chest was partially exposed at the top of his shirt, and thick grey hair seemed to burst out. His hands were wide, with unusually thick fingers; his cock was perfectly symmetrical, with thick, pliant foreskin. The man's urine streamed out in a bright yellow column and Alvaro could smell its sweetness from where he sat, huddled in a ball to escape detection. Finished, the man turned to check out the progress of the other player, who was now out of sight, then looked down at his cock, which had become semi-erect.

A faint smile came to the man's richly sensuous lips, and he began to fondle himself. "You're crazy, Harry," he whispered to himself, chuckling. "This is crazy." Cautiously looking back once more, he stepped further into the vegetation and took his cock out again, masturbating in earnest. "God, I need a release. It's killing me."

To Alvaro, it was the most immense penis he'd ever seen—at least the circumference of his own developing forearm. Young Alvaro held his breath, almost passing out as he watched the massive hand squeeze the thick, red organ and pump it fiercely. In just seconds the man announced his cock's eruption with a feral snort, then showered a bird of paradise plant with globs of semen. It was almost dusk, but Alvaro could sense the flush turning the man's face crimson; he wondered if his own face was just as red. As he watched the man milk the remaining fluid from the shrinking penis, Alvaro's own sexual set point and proclivity were established. From that point on, only an older, stocky man would ever satisfy him.

He spent his entire pubescence, and beyond, masturbating to the image of the man on the golf course. Almost convinced that he would never touch such a man, he turned eighteen and got up enough nerve to go to some of the bars in Old San Juan. Although he was fascinated that things were so open and carefree, he was disappointed that there were no older men around. He was amazed at how many of the young guys were attracted to him, and he suddenly became aware of his good looks. Convinced that he could turn the heads of older men too, he searched on.

Once, while prowling back streets just before midnight, he saw two older men entering a doorway at the end of the block. Rushing toward the spot, he looked up at a sign which simply read, "Tony's," and tried the door, which was locked. He saw a button and pressed it, looking through the glass at a marble stairway leading to a mezzanine. A large Puerto Rican bouncer appeared at the landing and scrutinized Alvaro carefully. He turned away, then stopped and looked Alvaro over again. Having second thoughts, he buzzed him up.

Tony's was a very elegant piano bar with a much more sedate crowd than the other places. A huge painting of a majestic centaur in silver and green adorned the wall behind the piano. A dramatic

abstract painting in silver and black hung from the opposite wall. There were women and many older men in attendance with an equal mix of Hispanics and Anglos. A tall, elegantly dressed Cuban man sat at the piano and sang in Portuguese and Spanish. Red-jacketed waiters scurried about, waiting on patrons sitting in alcoves on different levels. Tropical plants were everywhere and ceiling fans lazily turned, creating an ambience Alvaro had never before experienced. At first he was amazed that the bouncer had let him enter, but soon realized that he had finally developed into a handsome young man. His self esteem soared.

Alvaro noticed that a bald, heavy-set man sitting at the piano bar was staring at him. The man had a fringe of grey hair and wore wire-rimmed glasses. Seconds after Alvaro returned the glance, the man was next to him, offering to buy him a drink. His name was Marvin, he said, and he was a creative director for one of the largest advertising agencies in New York. He wasn't as ideal as the man on the golf course, but he was close enough.

Marvin insisted that Alvaro stay with him in his hotel room for the five-day duration of his vacation. Having gone off before and knowing that he would only be slightly missed by his mother, stepfather and six step-brothers and sisters, he allowed Marvin to wine and dine him at the best and most expensive places in Puerto Rico. Initially not turned on by the pasty, chubby body and short, cut cock, he grew to like Marvin and became infatuated with him on the eve of his departure for New York.

Returning to the real world of an overcrowded, hostile home life, he made the decision to leave Puerto Rico and try to get into the New York City Police Academy. And, as he busied himself with trying to figure out how he would finance such a move, a letter arrived from Marvin. Inside was a first class, one-way plane ticket to New York.

The relationship lasted just eleven months, then destructed under the weight of Marvin's unrelenting jealousy. Although Alvaro loved the elegant apartment in the East 60s and his status as a freshman at Columbia University (Marvin had made fun of Alvaro's desire to become a cop and insisted that he study engineering), he felt relieved when Marvin finally kicked him out. He was terrified at first, but found that Marvin's replacement was only as far as the next "older crowd" bar. The first two men he met offered to move him in, but the third offered cold cash. Learning that he could have it all by limiting his relationships to the short-lived, cash-only kind, he opted for that. Miraculously, he got through the AIDS epidemic without becoming infected.

And then he got involved with drugs . . . .

As the memories became painful, he shook his head and crushed out the cigarette in a small ashtray. The sound of the ashes rustling in the aluminum tray merged with the sound of whispering voices from the hallway. He silently moved to the door. Carefully opening it, he watched as Bobby and Harwin left what had always been a junk room at the end of the women's quarters and disappeared into the entertainment module. He had noticed earlier that the men had been cleaning out the room, so he surmised that something was up. The guys had become very secretive again, and he was determined to find out what was going on, rather than minding his own business like before. He entertained the idea of awakening Tina and Cindy, but knew that they would prefer to remain oblivious. *Worse, they'd probably tell Jack,* he thought.

He walked quietly down the dimly lit hallway and slipped into the room, pressing against the door until his eyes could adjust to the darkness. He made out the form of a woman, lying in a hospital bed with an i.v. attached to her arm. Her head was completely bandaged, a drainage tube exiting from the back. An electronic monitor behind the bed indicated that her vital signs were normal. Alvaro approached the bed and looked down at Mona. As tears trickled down his cheeks, he whispered, "Welcome to Ibapah General, honey."

Returning to his room, he heard Bobby's muted laughter and peered across the way through the nurse's undraped window. He saw Bobby and Harwin coming out of the the storage room located across the hall from Bobby's room. A passing memory again surfaced and he concentrated on the storage room. It was a fuzzy piece of history: a fear of being closed in, the sensation of rising, the sound of a hydraulic lift. *Surgery? Where was my surgery, anyway?* Harwin and Bobby had always maintained that the surgeries were performed in the dispensary and no one ever challenged the statement. After all, didn't they all recover in their regular rooms? He watched in amazement as Harwin pulled off a bloody rubber glove and threw it at a retreating Bobby, never bothering to lock the door. *It's always locked!*

After his heart stopped pounding with fear, he could ignore the impulse no longer and carefully stole through the mess module to the men's quarters. Hearing Bobby and Harwin making love inside Harwin's room, he went to Jack's door and listened. The big man was snoring. Calming his nerves, he quietly slipped into the small room and flipped the light switch. The steel door was open and fluorescent lights flickered on at the bottom of the stairs. Trembling with fear, he descended into the basement.

3

The Following Night

Alvaro watched from his window as all the others played a raucous game of strip poker in Jack's room. As Jack and Harwin drank heavily, Bobby injected something into his arm and Cindy and Tina smoked hashish from a pipe. Near eleven, Harwin and Bobby excused themselves and went to Harwin's room to make love. Jack indulged in a three-way with Cindy and Tina. Having seen it all before, Alvaro drifted off to sleep.

Minutes later, he awakened and saw that Jack and the girls had fallen asleep. Harwin and Bobby were likewise asleep, but Bobby had gone to his own room.

Again, Alvaro tried the door, but it was locked. Very carefully, he entered Bobby's room and fetched the keys off his dresser. Finding the right one by trial and error, he took it off the key ring, which he returned to Bobby's dresser. Never seeing Bobby use a key, he assumed that he wouldn't miss one.

Finding the book he wanted from his small, private library, he silently descended into the bunker and approached Moonfinch's bed.

"I'm back," Alvaro whispered.

Moonfinch awakened and smiled weakly like an infirm child.

"I knew you'd miss me," continued Alvaro, "so I thought I'd read you a story. Would you like to hear a story?"

Moonfinch nodded.

"Okay, but in return, you'll have to promise me something, all right?"

Moonfinch nodded again, looking at the book with anticipation.

"You have to promise me that you won't tell the others that I was here, okay?"

Moonfinch's mouth opened and a very weak, "Prom . . . misss," came forth.

As the Apache listened in rapt attention, Alvaro read from *Jonathan Livingston Seagull.* After the first chapter, Moonfinch's eyes began to close sleepily and Alvaro whispered, "Sleep tight, kid."

Consumed with hatred for Jack, Alvaro stared at the Indian for several minutes. When Moonfinch commenced snoring gently, he began to realize that something was very different about the Indian's face. Somehow, the features were softer. The thought arrived and it sent a chill down from his neck to his toes. "Oh, God, no," he whispered, carefully lifting the sheet. The hairs on his neck stood on end when he saw the swollen mass of stitched flesh. Of course, Harwin had done an exceptional job in spite of his alcoholic hands; the men had probably congratulated themselves, he figured. He thought of the first time he'd looked at himself in the mirror after his surgery and wished that he'd had his memory wiped away like Moonfinch's. He wondered whom he hated more, the butcher who mutilated him at the camp, or Jack and Harwin, who created Alvara, the woman.

"I'll avenge you, Moonfinch," he whispered. "And I'll never abandon you. I'll pay the motherfuckers back for you and me both. I'll wait until the time's right and I'll be . . . like . . . like an eagle. And my talons will *grip* his fucking head and sink those claws to the hilt." He squeezed the book in rage. "And I'll turn his cracking neck towards me and I'll scream, 'You *lose*, motherfucker. You *lose*.'"

The door suddenly opened above and Alvaro quietly slipped under the bed. He took deep, quiet breaths to calm his pounding heart.

Footfalls came halfway down the stairs before stopping. "Who left the fucking light on?" growled Jack, obviously drunk.

Soon, the footsteps continued again and Alvaro could see Jack's feet and legs staggering toward the bed. Reaching it, the shoes stopped just two feet from his head. Suddenly, he thought of the book and frantically looked down to find it cradled in his arms.

Jack looked into Moonfinch's awakening eyes and felt a surge of guilt as the brown irises sparkled and the mouth formed a shy, childlike smile.

He shook himself. "No. No way. Don't fall into that trap," he ordered himself. "It's war. It's survival." He shuddered. "And there's no future anyway." Quickly, he left the bunker, turning off the lights.

Hearing the hallway door slam shut and lock, Alvaro pulled himself out and soothed Moonfinch's brow in the darkness.

"See you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," murmured Moonfinch, with a higher-pitched voice.

XI

THE WRATH OF CHANGO

1

Three Weeks Later

Bobby stood behind the bar, absently washing glasses while watching Harwin set up the night's music on the sound system. Alvaro and Tina were busy sweeping the floor at different ends of the module.

Harwin held up a cassette tape for Bobby's approval. "How about this one?"

Bobby recognized it as being the tape that was playing when he killed Herrera. "Fuck you," he said, turning his attention to the glasses.

The sound of voices came from the entrance as Jack and a Mexican Army major entered. The major was tall and thin, with a handlebar moustache. Jack, wearing a black silk eye patch Tina had made for him, smoked a cigar and walked with his arm draped over the major's shoulders.

" . . . and he tell the Sears salesman, 'Hey, man, this here fuckin' chain saw is dull as hell.'" the major blurted with a ludicrous attempt at a Texas accent. "And so the Sears salesman say, 'Here, let me try it.'" The major looked for eye contact with Jack prior to the punch line of his joke. "And he pull the chord and the chain saw go, 'RRRRRRRRRRRR.' And the Texas A and M guy, he say, 'What is that *noise* !?'" The major laughed robustly at his own joke.

Jack laughed politely, then rolled his eye up at Bobby when the major looked away.

Bobby grinned, as did Alvaro and Tina.

"Where in the hell did you hear that one, Major?" asked Jack.

"I went to Rice University in Houston," said the major smugly in his normal voice. "They hate the Aggies too."

Bobby had to bite his tongue to keep from howling.

"And where did *you* go?" asked the major, gazing at Jack with suddenly lucid, extremely intelligent eyes.

Jack gestured for the major to join him at a table, then nodded toward Tina and Alvaro, who recognized it as a signal to leave the room. "Shit. I was lucky to make it through high school in L.A."

Both men sat and Jack cued Bobby.

Bobby nodded and said, "Major, what're you drinkin'?"

The major held up his hand in refusal, not looking at Bobby.

"So when is the general due?" asked Jack.

"This week, I think."

Jack chuckled. "Jesus, how long does it take? Every week they say it's the next week when he's coming."

The major shrugged. "The war destroys many plans, my friend, *tu sabes*. We do not move in a straight line."

"I thought you had the Americans pinned down at the Divide?"

"I wish we did, but it is not true. The Yanks broke through our lines last week in a major counter-offensive. The front is back in Utah."

Jack glanced at Harwin and Bobby, who were suddenly breathless.

The major followed Jack's gaze and laughed. "Don't let your hopes soar, *hombres*. The Yanks, they are very weak, *tu sabes*. Chango will push them back again."

"I don't give a shit either way, Major," lied Jack.

"You are lucky, my friend. Chango, he likes saloons and bordellos. He thinks it is not too good for his troop, *tu sabes*, but he and his top officers will come often. Chango, he prefers dark skin *putas* . . . *comprendes* ?" He nodded into the direction of where the girls had disappeared. "He will like the Puerto Rican, no?"

Jack rested his elbows on the table and spoke carefully. "When Chango pushes on to the front, will we be free to head west?"

"Oh, yes, my friend." He grimaced and tilted his head. " . . . unless, of course, Chango takes you with him." He seemed to became aware of the total silence and glanced again at Harwin and Bobby, who quickly looked away. Smiling, he continued. "You think that Las Vegas is good place to go? I think not. It is destroyed. There is much disease and famine there. *Muy peligroso*. Even L.A. is not too good." He glanced again at Harwin and Bobby.

As if he wanted to turn the dagger? wondered Jack.

"*Tu sabes*, maybe you go with Chango all the way to Washington, no?" Suddenly the cubicle with the hole caught his eye and he stood to get a better look. "I understand this is a popular thing." He sat and looked at Jack, even more amused. "*Mucho grifo, cabron*. How you say, 'kinky?' Why is it so popular?"

"And you went to *Rice* ?" Jack's remark was unintentional and he regretted it. "Well . . . " He stood, then nervously cleared his throat. " . . . one reason is that it's cheaper. Cubicle sex costs three thousand pesos. The hole is a thousand. It's also impersonal and some people prefer impersonal sex. It was pretty popular during the early eighties."

The major nodded. "I recommend getting rid of it when Chango is here, *comprendes* ?"

"Sure," said Jack. " . . . uh . . . *comprendo*." He chuckled nervously.

The major slapped the table, causing the other men to jump. "Well, it is late and your customers will begin to arrive with stiff *reatas*." He stood and walked to the entrance. "Good luck with Chango, *amigo*," he said, walking through the door, not looking back.

All three men stared after him, wondering what Herrera's replacement was all about.

Jack broke the silence. "I know this will break your heart, Bobby, but the glory hole is history."

Harwin smiled at Bobby. "If you want to continue your pig out, you'll have to wear a fucking wig, honey. I'll give you some hormones that'll grow you some tits."

Bobby glanced at Jack hungrily, then resumed his glass washing in silence.

Harwin poured himself a drink. "Join me?"

Bobby nodded.

"Why not?" sighed Jack.

Harwin poured each a drink. "You know, if we play our cards right we could end up in Washington and start the biggest escort service the country has ever seen."

"He's right," offered Bobby. "It sounds like the safest place to be—in the shadow of this General Chango."

Jack took a gulp from his drink, then toasted the others. "'By appointment to the Mexican Politburo.' I wonder what it's gonna be like living in a socialist country? Ah, but those fuckers will turn the tables. We'll be the ones picking lettuce and eating beans and tortillas."

"I never would have believed it," said Bobby. "How could it happen so fast?"

Harwin held up a finger. "Because the masses are stupid."

Both Bobby and Jack winked at each other and took sips.

"Look at the conservative gains in the eighties and early nineties, gentlemen. Fucking neo-Nazis did good homework and groomed old Ronnie. If he didn't remind the masses of their goddamn grandfather, he reminded them of John Wayne, so the little old ladies and rednecks and yuppies and those winking fat cats all stuffed the ballot boxes. And eight years later, the masses, being as *dumb* as they are, had no idea that this country had slipped into a hole. They chose to ignore the warnings about the S & L quicksand, the health care breakdown, the mounting AIDS epidemic. They didn't give a shit. The little old ladies still thought Ronnie was cute and the rednecks still had their long necks and television sets and a warm place to shit, and the yuppies could still get loans to buy BMW's, and the fat cats kept on winking at each other as they got fatter. Then along comes Bush, with a 'kinder and gentler nation' and fucking 'thousand points of light' buzz words and we ended up in a seemingly victorious war, yet slipped another hundred feet into the hole while nobody knew what was happening. Fuck the Arab world! Who gives a shit it they hate our guts! And if that wasn't bad enough, along comes that *asshole boy wonder president* and the hole got deeper . . . and the Arabs found a new weapon, and good-bye white eyes . . . ."

Jack laughed. "Decidedly left wing rhetoric, but *great* oratorio." He applauded.

Harwin gestured with his middle finger.

"Decidedly," said Bobby. "Damn, Jack—he sounds like a communist already."

"Socialist," corrected Harwin. "Communism died in the nineties, dummy. Didn't you hear all the right wing celebration over the winning of the Cold War?"

Jack smiled warmly at Harwin. "Oh, well. At least he knows his fucking surgery. What masterpieces this time, Harwin, me boy."

Harwin nodded, feigning embarrassment. "Thank you, sir." He lifted his drink in a toast. "To surgery."

Bobby and Jack lifted their glasses and said in unison: "To surgery!"

2

The Next Night

The bar was bathed in a reddish light. The cubicle door with the hole had been replaced. Hanging over the top of the cubicles was a sign which read, "Welcome, General Quintero." Harwin's music selection was driving and sexy. Harwin and Bobby stood behind the bar near the entrance, watching the door. The prostitutes were all dressed in silky, brightly colored dresses over bare skin. Cindy stood at one cubicle entrance, gently swaying with the music and puffing on a marijuana cigarette. At the entrance to the other cubicle stood Mona, who moved and hummed to the music with a faint smile on her lips. Alvaro, dressed in bright red, sat at the far end of the bar, pretending to read his bird book as he eavesdropped on Harwin and Bobby.

Bobby shuddered as the pressure of the moment seemed to overtake him. He poured himself another drink. "This doesn't feel right, Harwin."

"I know," said Harwin, dreamily.

Both men were oblivious to Alvaro.

Bobby studied him. "How do you feel?"

"About half stoned."

Bobby shook his head impatiently. "You know what I mean. How do you feel about us making it out of here?"

Harwin gave him a disdainful look. "Shit, I thought you wanted to go to the Cherry Blossom Festival with the big Indian."

"Serious, goddamnit!" snapped Bobby.

Harwin nodded and gave up his ribbing. "Our chances?" He thought for a moment. "Slim to none."

"Jesus, how encouraging." Bobby turned away from him.

"Okay, *serious*. I say you and me, we slip out of here in the truck and head for Seattle."

Bobby frowned. "And what about the oth-

ers?"

"The girls would make it somehow. I hear that even Salt Lake City will return to normal as soon as the big chief passes through." He looked at the girls and chuckled. "I can see them all as Salt Lake City housewives, waiting in the fresh produce lines."

Bobby became cool. "You left out Jack."

"So I did."

"We owe him, Har."

Harwin finished his drink in one gulp and poured another. "Does that mean that we have to die with him? No, Bobby. We've done everything he's asked us to do—more in the spirit of war insanity than anything else." He lowered his voice. "It's time to part company, now that the war has passed us by. We could go to Seattle or something and become two old queens with no past."

"And what do you think Jack will do?'

"He'll continue being the entrepreneur and opportunist until someone from the camps recognizes him. If anyone would be tried for war crimes, he would. After all, he was the boss. We only followed orders under the threat of exposure and a date with Doctor Mengele's urological scalpel ."

"He was following orders too, Harwin," interrupted Bobby.

"And we have a big advantage," continued Harwin, leaning forward for effect. "We wore surgical masks, my love. *No patients saw our faces.*"

Bobby stared at him in disbelief, whispering, "You disgust me, Harwin. If it weren't for Jack, we'd be dead."

3

Tina emerged from the women's quarters and joined Cindy. Spotting the marijuana cigarette, she took it out of Cindy's hand and took a deep puff. "Not here yet, huh?"

"Shit," said Cindy, taking the cigarette back. "I hope the fucker doesn't show up. I feel like just getting wasted and hitting the sack."

"Me too."

"It just goes on and on."

Tina affectionately nuzzled up next to Cindy. "Cindy, what're you going to do when the war's over? I mean *really* . . . not what we told Jack."

Cindy didn't meet Tina's gaze and continued smoking her cigarette in deep drags. "Oh, probably settle down with some farm boy in Canada and have eight kids."

Tina shook her head forlornly. "Do you ever have serious moments?"

"Yes," said Cindy, looking at her. "When I put on makeup."

"Have you cooled on Jack as much as I have?" asked Tina, looking around to see if Harwin or Bobby heard, but neglecting Alvaro.

Cindy resumed her previous stance, swaying with the music. "Surely you jest, love. He throws the meanest fuck this side of heaven."

Tina nodded toward Mona. "Have you taken a close look at her?"

"Not really."

"What do you think they did to her?"

"What do *you* care?"

Tina grabbed Cindy's arm. "Hey, Cindy. What the fuck's wrong with you, girl? You never used to be this calloused."

Cindy massaged the back of Tina's neck and smiled wanly. "It's always been there, Tina. It just hasn't shown much since my gender change." Her expression saddened. "But now, I'm getting this sick feeling of *deja vu.* All along, my hatred has been directed at *them*, those insect-eyed guards and doctors at the camp. And now I begin to wonder if maybe Jack and Harwin and Bobby aren't *them* too."

"You know something, don't you Cindy?" She carefully peered into Cindy's eyes for some sort of sign. "Did they have something to do with Captain Herrera's disappearance?"

Cindy nodded warily toward Harwin and Bobby, who were in a heated argument about Jack. "Bobby gave that one away with his shakes when they came looking for Herrera. And every time I look out back, I see coyotes digging in the same spot near the generator." She sighed. "I've been looking around, trying to find out where they did the surgery. She only has a small scar in the back of her head, so it had to be orthoscopic. You seen any instruments like that around here?"

Tina shook her head in dismay, glancing over at Mona.

"Alvara claims she saw the Indian, but she won't tell me what they did to him, or where they have him."

Tina's jaw dropped. "The Indian is *here* ?"

Both girls looked at Alvaro, who continued pretending to read the book while allowing a smile to form on his lips.

"Look at *Bird Bitch*," said Tina. "Does she look like the cat that swallowed the canary or what?"

Alvaro suddenly closed the book and walked toward the women. Ignoring Cindy and Tina, he leaned next to Mona and whispered into her ear: "Saw your boy friend a little while ago."

Cindy and Tina strained to listen.

Mona turned, exposing a dull expression. "Which one?" she asked, sweetly.

Alvaro smirked. "Jesus, woman, are *you* out to lunch."

Mona frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I guess I should feel lucky," said Alvaro, shrugging. "I'm surprised that they didn't do some *snipping* on me, too. Looks like Moonfinch got the deluxe job. All *she* does is smile like some freshly coiffed corpse and talk like a child."

Cindy and Tina stared at each other, mouthing the word '*she*.'

Mona looked puzzled. "Who's Moonfinch?"

"Never mind, honey," said Alvaro, beginning to feel nauseated.

"I have amnesia."

"Is that what they call it?" said Alvaro, wishing for a cold beer to settle his stomach.

"No one can tell me how I got from Chicago," Mona continued, "to wherever we are now."

"Utah."

"Utah," Mona repeated.

"Ibapah, Utah, to be exact."

Mona smiled.

"You don't remember the concentration camp?" asked Alvaro.

"Concentration camp?"

Alvaro shuddered. "No, girl, you just enjoy yourself while you can. God, I'd give my left nut if I . . . " He chuckled. " . . . leg, if I could forget."

4

Jack rushed in from the men's quarters, out of breath and excited. Suddenly, there were sounds of trucks pulling up to the front entrance. Jack ran to the center of the room and held up his arms for attention. He was slightly weaving, having had a couple of strong drinks to calm his nerves. "He's here. Everyone on your toes, okay? Let's give this group a run for their money—only no money. It's on the house!"

All attention was on the front entrance as truck doors began to slam and footsteps approached.

General Quintero entered behind two heavily armed soldiers, who immediately posted themselves on each side of the door. He had long, silver hair and wore a short jacket with two silver stars on each lapel. From the waist down, he wore a loin cloth over buckskin trousers and moccasin boots. Behind him were three Mexican Army colonels, followed by an assortment of Apache and Mexican lieutenant colonels and majors.

The general called "Chango" moved slightly to the music as he surveyed each of the girls. He noticed the banner and pointed to it, smiling back at the officers. Ultimately, his gaze held steady on Alvaro.

"Welcome, General Quintero," said Jack apprehensively, his face flushed with stress and excessive alcohol.

"Call me Chango, my friend," the general said, his eyes lingering on Alvara, then acknowledging Jack. He spread out his arms. "You have a fine place here." He turned to his contingent. "At ease, men. We're here to unwind. R and R, you know? Drink and fuck, *caballeros* !"

A burst of relieved laughter followed. The three colonels immediately walked toward Cindy, Tina and Mona, who led them into cubicles. The other officers would have to wait their turn in the pecking order.

Alvaro, very much impressed with Chango, stood and smiled alluringly at him.

"This place is yours, General," said Jack, noticing the chemistry between the two. "Alvara! Come here and meet a friend of mine."

Alvaro moved toward the general, a proud, I'm-the-best-piece-of-ass-here look on his face. He stood in front of the general and looked slightly down at him.

Jack slipped away to join Harwin and Bobby at the bar. His hands trembling, he poured another drink. "God, I hope this works out," he mumbled.

Salsa began to play on the sound system and Chango gently held Alvaro, leading him into an erotic *merengue*. Having always loved the dance he learned when he was a child, he performed in earnest. Several of the other officers looked on jealously.

"You are a fine woman," whispered Chango. "You tap the beast in me."

Alvaro laughed softly. "Is that what's swelling against my leg?"

The general growled. "It searches for a warm, moist home."

"Then welcome home, General," Alvaro purred.

"You been here long?"

"About six months. It's dusty and dry, but it's better than living with the coyotes."

"Then perhaps you've seen a tall, good-looking, young brave wandering around in the desert?"

Alvaro stiffened slightly, thinking of Moonfinch, but kept his composure. *No, it couldn't be*. "I've seen everything imaginable wandering around out there."

Chango smiled lecherously and ground his crotch into Alvaro's. "An Indian, with long hair like mine?"

Oh, my God. "Maybe." Alarm spread throughout Alvaro's body. "Why?"

"He's my son. He was supposed to meet me near this bordello."

Alvaro's stomach tightened. "What's his name?"

"Moonfinch."

Alvaro's dancing became stiff and his throat turned dry. He started to tremble. "Maybe that's him. Lives off the desert. I've seen him a couple of times."

"Ahhhh, *si*. That's my *son*." Chango said it proudly. "I'll find him tomorrow . . . but tonight is ours."

They danced on as Chango kissed Alvaro's neck and breasts.

Alvaro feigned hotness and gestured toward one of the small rooms, which had just been vacated by Cindy and a Colonel. "Let's go over here for awhile." He led the general to the little room, where both quickly disrobed. Chango lay down on the bed and Alvaro hovered over him, his small breasts hanging erotically and brushing against the general's hairless chest. Alvaro gently grabbed the dark cock and smeared an abundance of pre-cum over the large balls. And then he realized that he had it in his power to bring the house down. He felt evil, yet omnipotent. He thought of all the violation and humiliation he'd received and knew that revenge was only a good actress' performance away. "I don't know why Jack gave you to me."

Chango frowned. "Why? You got something wrong with you?"

"No." Alvaro vaguely pouted. "It's just that we have a really beautiful Indian girl. She puts me to shame. But . . . I guess Jack just wants to keep her for himself. He's pretty jealous of her."

"Oh?" The general was interested.

"Maybe I can swing something. How about us both? A three-way right here in this bed."

"Hey, that sounds wild, baby," he said, now becoming even more excited.

Alvaro slipped back into his dress. "Give me just a minute, okay?" He flipped a switch and a wall-mounted video monitor came on, exposing a scene featuring two women licking a huge black man all over his body. "Watch this while I'm gone."

"I'll be right here with my dick in my hand, doll." He began to stroke his cock, glancing up at the monitor.

5

Alvaro slipped out of the room and, pleased to find that Jack, Bobby and Harwin were preoccupied with entertaining the other officers, slipped into the men's quarters. He walked to Bobby's room and opened the top drawer of his dresser. Finding the single key he'd located the night before, he took it and walked through the mess module and around through the women's quarters to the locked storage room where Mona had previously recuperated. He slipped the key into the lock and opened the door.

Moonfinch sat in darkness near the window, staring out at the night.

"Moonfinch?" Alvaro whispered. "It's me again . . . Alvaro."

Moonfinch turned and smiled. "This is much better than downstairs. Are you going to read me a story, Alvaro?"

6

Jack watched with amusement as a Mexican major made furtive eyes at Bobby, who was lightly licking his lips in response. Jack pretended not to notice as Bobby followed the officer outside. He chuckled. *Bobby could make out in church during a sermon,* he thought, pouring his sixth double vodka.

The music became wilder and Cindy began to dance nude on top of a table. Tina was sucking the cock of an Apache lieutenant colonel as several other officers stood watching, waiting their turn for Tina's mouth. Mona lay inside one of the cubicles, passively taking each man on. Chango came out of his cubicle and laughed at the sight of the orgy.

Harwin, laughing, looked at Jack. "The general must have fucked Alvara to death. She probably can't walk."

Jack watched as the general walked back into the cubicle, then out again, as if pacing. Under normal conditions, his brain would have signaled an alarm, but there was no signal and he merely shrugged. A movement near the entrance caught his attention; he focused on Bobby, who had come back inside and was hungrily scrutinizing the officers.

At that same moment, Alvaro led Moonfinch into the room. Moonfinch's hair was silky and brushed. Her lips and vacant, dull eyes were heavily made up. A skimpy green dress clung to her body, which had yet to fill out as a result of the hormones.

Harwin dropped a bottle of bourbon, which exploded on the floor. Jack struggled to focus on who was with Alvaro.

"What the fuck is she doing?" whispered Harwin to Jack.

"I don't know . . . . "

"Stop her, Jack. She's not healed enough yet," said Harwin urgently.

In his intoxicated state, Jack failed to perceive the danger and found the situation rather funny.

"If he's hung, she'll bleed," Harwin insisted. "The silicon implants are just about healed, but he may see the scars."

"We should have killed Alvara, Jack," said Bobby, joining them.

Alvaro and Moonfinch disappeared inside the cubicle with Chango as the show continued in the middle of the room.

"Stop her!" growled Harwin, grabbing Jack's arm.

Jack clutched Harwin's wrist and squeezed it hard, easily pulling Harwin's hand off his arm. "It's too late, Har." He regarded the cubicle again. "Shit, let's see what happens. What's he gonna find out

from a bleeding zombie?"

"They're both Indian, goddamnit!"

Jack waved his hand in dismissal.

7

Alvaro and Moonfinch stood over Chango, who was vigorously playing with his cock. Gradually, his hand became stationary and he looked questioningly at Alvaro. "What is this? She looks sick."

Moonfinch held on to Alvaro, obviously afraid of the general.

As Alvaro probed deeply into the general's eyes, he detected a small look of recognition, followed by denial. And then he realized the consequences of what he was doing, just as overpowering guilt began raging within him. In his quest to hurt Jack, Harwin and Bobby, he was actually destroying the general, Cindy, Tina, Mona, Moonfinch—all the innocents. He grabbed Moonfinch. "You're right, General, she does look pretty ill." He laughed nervously. "Let me take her back and I'll be back to send you to the moon and back." Wincing at his choice of words, he turned to leave with Moonfinch.

"Stop," Chango ordered softly.

Alvaro turned to face him, terrified.

The general stared at Moonfinch, then squinted and slowly shook his head from side to side. He sat up in the bed and appeared acutely ill. He searched Alvaro's eyes, then shook his head. "She looks just like . . . ."

Alvaro looked down, a look of desolation on his face.

The general reluctantly crawled toward Moonfinch. With a trembling hand, he pulled up the green dress and looked in horror at the birthmark just above Moonfinch's knee. It was in the shape of a small bird.

8

As Chango's spine-tingling wail silenced the room, Alvaro gently led Moonfinch into an empty cubicle. Mona and an Apache officer slipped out of the other enclosure, struggling to put their clothing on. The Apache major looked in on Chango and backed away, shrugging to the other officers.

Jack, Harwin and Bobby stood transfixed.

The Alliance officers seemed reluctant to move as well. Some were half-smiling and others seemed concerned. It was as if they were unsure whether the general had had a profound sexual experience or had suffered a heart attack. And who in his right mind would want to interrupt the former?

Tina and Cindy sensed a chilling turn of events and inched toward the entrance to the women's quarters.

Suddenly, Chango roared like a charging gorilla, battering and kicking the enclosure to pieces, leaving only the wall to which the video monitor was attached. Bellowing, "No! No! No! No!" he shook his fists and looked about wildly with inflamed eyes. Then, standing nude before all the others, he began to bawl into his hands and sat on the bed. The monitor above him absurdly featured an emaciated young man with long hair, masturbating over a pair of large breasts.

The officers stood and looked on in horror. One officer nearby quietly stepped over the pieces of splintered wood and turned off the monitor.

Eerily, Chango abruptly stopped crying and reached for his clothing, his face contorted with rage. By the time he was fully dressed again, his face was ashen, yet seemingly composed. He stiffly walked toward his only surviving offspring and held out his hand. Moonfinch, terrified of him, cringed and buried her head against Alvaro, who was sobbing openly.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry," whispered Alvaro in agony.

Chango considered the apology and nodded. "My son is now dead," he choked, slowly turning his attention to those around him. His fierce, black eyes scanned the bar, lingering first on Bobby, then Harwin, then Jack. He stiffly walked to Bobby, who was paralyzed with fear.

"Did you do this to my son?" asked Chango flatly.

Bobby opened his mouth, but couldn't speak. He shook his head emphatically.

The general locked his gaze on Harwin, approaching him. "Did you?"

"No," whispered Harwin, holding onto the bar to keep from reeling.

The burning eyes found Jack. "That leaves you." The general's voice cracked, but his expression remained the same. Abruptly he turned and walked outside, his contingent scrambling for clothing and following him.

Jack was fully numb and could only stare at Alvaro, who was now standing in the middle of the room. His mind fought to throw off the effects of the alcohol. "Why?" asked Jack, finding his voice.

Sensing that Jack didn't have the presence of mind to shoot him, Alvaro turned and ran to the women's quarters. "I'm going to the fucking truck before Chango comes out of the shock and blows this place to pieces!" he yelled back.

Cindy, Mona and Tina ran after him as Bobby and Harwin scurried into the men's quarters.

Jack felt as if he was inside a vacuum. Nothing was real. He welcomed the end to this nightmare, so that he could prepare for General Quintero's visit. He could see himself operating a high class

whorehouse in Chicago and staying sexually active past the age of eighty-five. He groped his way to a bottle of vodka and poured another drink. His face felt inanimate, like wet clay. He slid onto the bartender's stool, then heard the sound of his truck starting and moving away rapidly. Eventually he became aware of the bizarre image of Moonfinch, humming and rocking on the edge of the cubicle bed used by Chango.

"Looks like your daddy didn't want a girl, huh?" said Jack.

Moonfinch stopped rocking and smiled at him.

Weird dream, though Jack.

Hearing footsteps, he turned to find that Bobby was standing at the edge of the bar.

"Is this a dream, Bobby?"

Bobby sadly shook his head. "I wish it were."

He felt heat returning to his face and sharp pain enveloping his stomach. Then he sensed profound fear. He looked into his drink and took another sip. "Why didn't you leave?"

"I don't know," Bobby said softly. "I got inside the truck, then just . . . just got out. I watched them drive a few yards, then Alvara remembered that they'd forgotten to take Moonfinch and she went fucking nuts. They all held her down so she couldn't jump out of the truck. Then, about a quarter mile later, they were stopped by Alliance troops. They're dead meat just like you and me. He sat on a barstool across from Jack. There was a look of resignation in his eyes. "I'm with the man I want to die with."

9

Alvaro and the others were driven by troop transport truck to a huge, sprawling military encampment bordered by thousands of tanks. As they were ushered out of the truck by four soldiers with automatic weapons, Alvaro scanned the moonlit horizon and saw the lights of "Ibapah Jack's" about fifteen miles away. He shuddered at the thought of Moonfinch dying with Bobby and Jack and became anxious to talk to someone in authority.

They were brought before a Mexican colonel inside a mobile office and ordered to sit on a bench before the officer. As they obeyed, the guards lowered their muzzles and lined the walls at parade rest.

Alvaro studied the colonel, wondering how—or if—he should ask about Moonfinch.

The colonel, a heavy-set, bald man, looked at each of them carefully. "Originally, I'd planned to question you one at a time, but I thought this arrangement would work out better." He took out a notebook and pen, glancing at Harwin. "You, sir. Who are you?"

Harwin swallowed hard. "Major Harwin Mattingly . . . I'm an army doctor . . . or was. I'm a deserter from the U.S. Army." His voice was small and higher pitched than usual.

"And what is your area of expertise, Doctor Mattingly?" asked the colonel.

"Vascular surgery . . . actually, uhh, general surgery." His eyes began to blink rapidly. "I've been in several field hospitals, so I've done just about every surgery imaginable."

"You can say that again," mumbled Alvaro, the anxiety over Moonfinch squeezing him.

The colonel seemed amused by Alvaro. "What did this woman mean by that, Doctor Mattingly?" He turned his attention back to Harwin.

Harwin's voice almost froze. "Uhh . . . I've . . . I've done gender changes on . . . ." He reluctantly pointed at Cindy, Tina and Alvaro. "It wasn't my idea, but I went along with it for humanitarian reasons."

Alvaro's eyes widened, but he kept quiet.

"Humanitarian?" The colonel glanced at Alvaro, then settled his gaze on Harwin.

"These three were given female genitalia because they'd been mutilated by the researchers at Baxter Flats," Harwin explained.

The colonel glanced at each of them. "Is that correct, ladies?"

Alvaro, Cindy and Tina nodded in unison.

"And you?" the colonel asked Mona.

"We found her in the desert, suffering from amnesia," Harwin hurriedly said. "She's . . . a real woman."

"Tell me, Doctor Mattingly," continued the colonel, "were you involved in any . . . research for the U.S. Army?"

"No," said Harwin, sweat beading on his forehead. "I deserted from a field hospital in Salt Lake City."

Realizing that he didn't have the heart to get Harwin killed, Alvaro kept his mouth shut.

"Did you have anything to do with the gender change on General Quintero's son?" asked the colonel quietly.

"No," Harwin said louder and more emphatically. "It was Jack's idea; he did it by himself. After he started the surgery in a fit of rage, I stepped in to ensure that the patient didn't die. By the time I became involved, there was no way I could reverse it."

You lying motherfucker, thought Alvaro.

The colonel tapped a pencil on his desk and studied all of them carefully. Suddenly, he picked up a telephone and punched a four-digit number. He

spoke something in rapid Spanish, then hung up.

Alvaro understood him to say that he had a good doctor and four incredibly beautiful women there who were eager to serve the Alliance. Then Alvaro could no longer hold it back. "Colonel, what about Moonfinch?"

"What about him?" asked the colonel absently, writing inside his notebook.

Alvaro glanced at the others, wishing he could have asked in private. "I promised him that I would never abandon him. He's like a helpless child now. Could I please take care of him? Could you send someone for him?" His voice began to crack and he struggled not to break down.

The colonel's expression took on a soulful quality, as if he felt compassion for Alvaro's agony, but he said, simply: "Moonfinch is no longer a 'he.' I'm afraid there is nothing I can do."

Oh yes there is, thought Alvaro, licking his lips insidiously, causing the colonel to squirm.

10

Thirty Minutes Later

Bobby sat at the bar, staring at three vials and two hypodermic syringes. Across from him, behind the bar, sat Jack, slightly less drunk than before, yet still drinking. Bobby's face was puffy from the tears he shed for Harwin, who he was sure had been shot.

Jack, on the other hand, featured a look of clinical interest. He was conscious of the fact that he was about to die, but, as usual, his gut told him that he was invincible—that he would overcome this obstacle, as he had all the previous ones. His conscious mind was confident that his gut was wrong this time, however. He was well aware of the line of tanks on the horizon, all awaiting instructions from a completely warped and devastated General Quintero, who was undoubtedly planning a most horrible scenario for revenge. He glanced again at the bed and saw Moonfinch, staring back at him like a frightened child.

Jack joined Bobby in studying the vials. One was morphine and another was insulin, but he couldn't make out the third. "What's that one?" Jack pointed at the vial.

Bobby shuddered from the effects of crying. "It's something I mixed up. I've been taking it for years." He looked up and almost smiled. "I've had periods of depression all my life. Harwin used to give me the standard anti-depressants, but they had terrible side effects. So I created this. It's sort of like an amphetamine, but it has an aphrodisiac effect on me."

"Gonna mix 'em up, huh? Gonna take the easy way out?" Jack laughed. "Shit, man," he growled, reaching under the bar and pulling out his loaded pistol. "When the shells start whistling, I'm going to Ten Millimeter City." He chuckled and slammed the pistol down on the bar, causing Bobby to cringe. Abruptly he asked, "Did you really love Harwin?"

Bobby's face screwed up as he began to cry again.

"What's it like to really love someone, Bobby?" continued Jack, unimpressed by the tears.

Bobby buried his face in his hands.

"Have you ever had just one moment of true joy, Bobby?" He took a gulp from his drink, then reached up with his big hand and wiped a trickle from his chin. "I'm not talking about a fantastic piece of ass or a good steak or a . . . uh . . . good *bowel* movement. True joy, my boy." He paused to see if Bobby would answer. "Have you?"

Bobby nodded his head slightly.

"Never in my whole, fucked-up life have I ever . . . *ever* felt one fleeting moment of true joy," announced Jack. "Why the fuck is it so goddamn illusive? Why?" He took another gulp and topped his drink off with more vodka. "Shit! And unless a fucking miracle takes place in a couple of seconds, I'll've gone my entire life without experiencing true joy. That's a bitch, Bobby. Pussy out the goddamn ass, but no love. I've had women—and men—fawning over me all my life, but no one loved me."

"Except me," reminded Bobby, shuddering. "My one moment of true joy came when I had you that night up on the rocks under the full moon."

Jack smirked. "Bull shit, Bobby. You mean to tell me that you didn't have any joy with Harwin? Hell, you loved the fucker and you could have died with him, but you opted to die with me instead. You just screwed up your goddamned karma, fool." He glanced at Moonfinch, who still sat on the bed. "He screwed up his karma, Moonfinch!" He laughed. "I thought your, you know, *karma* was with Harwin and I'll be goddamned if it's not with little old me." He chuckled bitterly. "Dying is a . . ." He picked up the pistol and checked out its clip. " . . . is a *contract*, Bobby. Life presents all kinds of times to die for convenience—when the spirit says it's time. All *ways* to die too. A Jack the Ripper—oh, God, what a slip." He hissed a wheezing laugh and took another long sip. "He comes to town and all these souls waiting for a train to another life bring their—hah—*unsuspecting* bodies up for slaughter. It's a way to die and get on with your karma. Souls make deals with each other while the bodies sit around looking dumb, so I guess your soul and mine've already made a deal about what kind of relationship we're gonna end up with." He gently pushed Bobby's arm.

"Bobby, you listening to me?"

Bobby lifted his head and nodded.

"If I *kill* you—or *fuck* you or *deliver* you from evil . . . or deliver you *to* evil, you'll stay because your soul already made the deal." He smiled smugly. "Hey!" he shouted, causing Bobby to jump, then spoke more softly. "Why did you stay, Bobby? What could I possibly give you in . . ." He looked at his watch, then threw his hands up. " . . . however long it takes Geronimo to say 'Fire.'"

"I . . . " Bobby's voice cracked. "I stayed because . . . " He struggled to speak deliberately. "Because I want . . . the *zenith*. I want to die with your juice inside me." He smiled at Jack with a dreamy look on his face.

Jack shook his head and whistled. "Yeah, you said that before." He stumbled off his barstool and walked haltingly to the window. He whirled around, temporarily losing his balance and catching on to the bar. "Zenith?"

Bobby looked somber.

"I would think that death is the *nadir*, not the zenith," argued Jack, drawing a circle in the air with his hand and stopping at the bottom. "Way down here, someplace."

"I want to make *love* to you, Jack. I've loved you from the minute I first laid eyes on you, but I could never reach you except for that one night."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "I thought you loved Harwin. You lived with the fucker for ten years."

"I did . . . in a less passionate way. You see, he wasn't *dangerous* like you. You excited me and terrified me at the same time. I used to fantasize having you just at the point of death. You know, like I could take it with me to another plane and not have to digest it . . . or lose it."

Jack stared at Bobby thoughtfully, then glanced out the window again. "Why don't they fucking fire and get it over with?" He walked back to Bobby. "What is this thing you have about my cum?"

"It's a thing I have about all of you. It's your entire chemistry. All I had to do was get to within ten feet of you and I was hooked. Man, I would shake like a junkie and come all over myself just jacking off to your image. My whole ideal changed when I met you. You were, you know, like a *standard* that no one—not even Harwin—could come close to." He looked at Jack lovingly.

"I thought you were high on something the other night," said Jack, frowning. "Nobody's jissom tastes that good, man."

"Has nothing to do with taste, Jack. You were sweet and pungent at the same time, but it's what it did to *me* that counted."

"It was the booze. Sorta like what asparagus does to piss." The slurring of Jack's speech worsened.

"It's like your semen was vital and, you know, *decayed* at the same time."

"So take my decayed dick out and suck it if you want." Jack unzipped his pants and ambled toward Bobby.

Bobby looked at him with amazement, but felt the familiar breathlessness as Jack approached him. "You're so good and yet so unspeakably evil, too, Jack."

"You never were a listener, Bobby."

"I've killed because you asked me to. I've beat off to your image every night since I met you. When I had sex with Harwin, I was really with you." Bobby reached out and pulled Jack's hand to his face. He kissed Jack's fingers, hand and wrist.

Jack stared down at him, then looked toward the entrance to the module as an amplified chanting sound reached them from several hundred yards away.

Bobby reached inside Jack's trousers and pulled out the swelling piece of flesh, then dropped to his knees. "My love," he whispered, then licked the expanding head, savoring the pre-cum. "Jack?"

"Yeah."

"I want you to shoot me through the head just as soon as you blow your load, okay?" Bobby looked up at him pleadingly.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

The chanting continued. It was ethereal and rhythmical, consisting of a short phrase, repeated once, followed by two deep, heavy drum beats. It was hypnotic, yet nerve-shattering in spite of Jack's drunken condition. Assuming that he was losing his mind, Jack found it entertaining that a deranged general had gone out of his way to devise such a bizarre form of terrorism in order to drive an already mad man insane . . . just before vaporizing him.

Oblivious to the concert outside, Bobby took his plates out and dropped them to the floor, breaking the top plate in half. He began to suck Jack's cock in earnest.

To Moonfinch, the chant had a different meaning. From somewhere within her altered brain, the memory surfaced of an identical chant. She watched Jack and Bobby with fascination and listened to the chant as an infant would the sound of her mother's voice from another room. Her gaze met Jack's and she felt a warmth at the sight of his drunken smile. She wondered how Jack figured in her life—wondered if this man with the funny smile and single bulging eye was her father.

Abruptly the chant became louder and Jack gasped, filling Bobby's mouth with semen. His body flexed its muscles and violently shook, as if atop a massive vibrator. Bobby's face registered wildness then rapture as the crotch of his trousers

became wet. Wildly, he looked up and grabbed the pistol, turning the barrel to his temple. "Ummmmm!" he pleaded.

Jack pulled the pistol back.

Bobby allowed Jack's cock to slip out of his mouth. "Now, Jack! Now!"

Jack stuffed the pistol inside his belt, then zipped up his pants and shook his head. "This is crazy," he mumbled to himself.

"It's dying, Jack," sobbed Bobby. "It's dying in my stomach. *You promised!*"

Jack was overcome with revulsion and drug Bobby by the collar to the front entrance. He opened the door and threw Bobby outside, closing the door and locking it.

As Bobby pounded on the door, Jack could hear the sound of a truck speeding for the complex. He turned out the lights and watched through the window.

The truck slid to a stop and four soldiers jumped out, brandishing automatic rifles and prodding Bobby into the truck. The truck then sped away at a high rate of speed.

And then the chanting stopped.

"It stopped," said Moonfinch.

Jack looked at her as never before. She had found a blanket and covered herself.

"Are you my father?"

Her sobering words moved him, tore into him, rendering him suddenly humbled. His face burned as hot tears slid down his cheeks. He went to her and held her, sobbing. She held him tightly, drawing warmth and reassurance from his body.

Suddenly, he swept her up and ran to the bunker, closing the heavy metal door just as the whine of artillery warheads pierced the silence.

XII

A MOST UNLIKELY PAIR

1

The first shells landed beyond the complex, giving Jack more time. Frantically turning over tables, he created a bunker within a bunker, piling mattresses on top. Quickly grabbing blankets and emergency food and water kits, he pushed Moonfinch and the provisions inside the fashioned enclosure and jumped inside as more shells whined toward them. He wrapped part of a blanket around her eyes and ears and did the same to himself, then lay over her.

The explosions reverberated in his head for what seemed like hours. After the barrage was over, the ink-black darkness convinced him that he had died, but finally he realized that he was holding on to Moonfinch. He wondered if she had died, then felt her trembling. From far away, he heard the din of approaching tanks.

"Jack?" Moonfinch whispered, apparently hearing the tanks.

"It's okay," he said, releasing his vice-like grip on her and brushing dust from both of them. He reached up to feel if their table top "roof" was still intact. It was, so he peered out from under the enclosure and into the darkness of the bunker

"Jack?" A small, childlike voice.

"Shhhhh." He listened as one tank seemed to stop right over them. Dust fell from its weight. He heard muffled voices.

Soon, the tank moved farther and ran over the entrance to the bunker. Suddenly, a chunk of concrete fell to the floor with a crash, and an opening appeared near the top of the stairway. He could see fragments of light beams pouring over the area above the bunker.

He protectively pulled Moonfinch to his chest, fearing that Chango's troops would see the opening and realize that there was a bunker. The fact that Chango hadn't ordered heavier artillery convinced him early on that the general had not been told of the bunker. *You're slipping, Alvara,* he thought.

A boot appeared above and he squeezed his eye shut, willing that the soldier not look down or fall into the bunker. The boot disappeared, then there was silence.

Jack held his breath.

The sound of a small truck reached them and Jack could visualize the general being driven to the site to witness the destruction he'd ordered. The truck stopped and a single, muffled voice shouted orders, followed by the sounds of retreating tanks and trucks.

After several minutes of silence, Jack covered them both with blankets and they slept in each others arms.

2

Jack awakened, his vision drawn to the ray of sunshine streaking across the floor. He looked up and saw the foot-square opening near the top of the stairs.

"Jack?" Moonfinch felt Jack move and clung to him.

"It's okay," he assured her, pulling away and crawling out from under the makeshift enclosure. He climbed up the rubble-strewn stairway and pushed at the steel door; it didn't move. *It must be covered with what was left of the modules,* he thought. He descended the stairs and walked to just below the opening a few feet away from from the steel door. It was well beyond his reach, but he pulled over a

heavy table and found a smaller table to place on top of it.

"No!" protested Moonfinch.

Jack held up his hand to her and shook his head, climbing first on one, then the other table. He cautiously stuck his head through the hole and scanned the area, confirming that the troops had moved on. He glanced at the debris atop the steel door. "If I had a small diameter rod, I could probably shove off some of that shit that's covering the door."

"I'll look," Moonfinch answered enthusiastically. She crawled from underneath the enclosure wrapped in a blanket and searched the area.

Her mobility and sharpness brought Jack a nuance of relief. It occurred to him that perhaps he had damaged her brain, causing her to regress. He'd wanted amnesia only, having her lose only her memory of identity, events and people. "It's okay, Moonfinch, I'll get a flashlight." He carefully climbed down the shaky scaffold and led her to a cabinet near the base of the stairway. "I think I saw one in here." He opened the cabinet, finding a large, heavy flashlight, a large candle and matches.

"Is there an emergency generator?" asked Moonfinch, not that sure of what it would look like. She wasn't even sure of why she asked.

Jack stared at her, concerned over how much memory she had retained. "No. They were installing one, but never got it going." He nodded toward a closet across the room. "It's in there."

Moonfinch followed his nod. "Let's find the rod, then."

"Wait a minute," said Jack, softly. He sat on a table and lit the candle, placing it nearby. He patted the table, motioning for her to sit.

She sat where he indicated.

He placed his huge hand on her shoulder. "How do you feel?"

She smiled, shyly. "I'm okay. The pain is almost gone."

"How do you feel about life in general?"

She tried to find words. "I . . . I don't know." She contemplated him warmly. "I have amnesia. I don't know who I am."

Jack stroked her shoulder. "Tell me what you're trying to figure out. What are you thinking about?"

Her eyes became misty. "I miss Alvaro." She shuddered. "I feel very frightened." She shook her head. "For a long time, I wondered if you were my father."

Jack again sensed an intense regret and felt stunned that the foreign emotion now resided within him.

"Are you?"

He swallowed hard. "No . . . No, I'm not." He massaged her neck. "We found you wounded in the desert. All you could tell us was your name."

She looked off into space. "All I remember is coming out of a deep sleep. Alvaro was reading to me."

He braced himself. "What did she tell you?"

She looked confused. "Alvaro is a 'he.'"

Jack smiled. "Right."

"I don't remember too well," she continued. "He was upset about something. Something about an eagle . . . an eagle's . . . tal . . . talons . . . . I don't know."

"Is there anything that bothers you?" Jack became lost in the candle reflection in her eyes.

She looked down and sighed. "Yes. I get this feeling that I've been changed." She held both hands in her lap and rocked slightly. "A thought depresses me, and I chase it from my mind. I sometimes feel like an outcast."

Jack drew her close and hugged her. "I won't cast you out, kid."

She held on to him, welcoming the sense of warmth and comfort.

It was as if someone else had taken over Jack's body. He replayed the short memory of his protective hug of Moonfinch. He studied the image and looked for the glint of the monster's eye, finding instead a man who had been given a second chance—a man crippled with awesome guilt. Suddenly, living was essential. Saving Moonfinch was everything. It would be his salvation.

3

Later that morning, they placed four candles around the bunker and found a cache of clothing, food rations and bottled water. Jack searched the pharmacy storage closet and found several liters of ethanol alcohol, suitable for human consumption. He also found antibiotic capsules, a healing accelerant and an injectable, synthetic estrogen for Moonfinch's transition to womanhood. He stacked the bottles, capsules and vials on a table and wondered how much of it they could carry in back packs.

As they sat down to a breakfast of military rations, Jack began to tremble and feel nauseated. Suddenly, he began to sweat as he was overcome by a creeping, numbing anxiety. Recognizing the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal, he prepared himself for the worse symptom of all: hallucinations. Abruptly, he grabbed one of the bottles of ethanol and opened the top. He held the bottle top to his mouth and felt his face flush as the strong fumes drifted up his nose, sending a small amount of alcohol into his bloodstream. As his hands began to shake violently, he threw the bottle into a corner.

Moonfinch was startled and moved away from him.

"Oh, my God," he mumbled to himself. "I had no idea I was this bad. Oh, sweet Jesus." He ran to the storage closet and found a bottle of strong tranquilizers. Glancing back at Moonfinch's terrified expression, he tried to smile.

"What's wrong?" asked Moonfinch.

He sat next to her and took two of the tablets with bottled water. "Moonfinch . . . I have a problem and I need your help, okay?"

She nodded.

"For the next few days, I might be a little hard to live with," he said soothingly. "My body has to pass some poisons that it accumulated over the last few years." He tossed up the bottle of tranquilizers twice and placed them on the table. "But these will help a lot. I'll probably shake a lot and sweat and perhaps I'll throw up." He smiled and she did likewise. "I might even see things that aren't there. . . but you stick by me, okay?"

"Okay," Moonfinch assured.

He began to eat an oat bran breakfast bar very slowly, hoping to keep it down. "And I'll stick by you, too."

She hungrily began to open various foil-wrapped packages.

After eating, Moonfinch found a four-foot section of reinforcing rod in a closed-off alcove where the emergency generator was to have gone. In spite of his condition, Jack climbed onto the two tables again and struggled to push debris off the metal door. Doing all he could with the rod, he gathered his strength and pushed at the door, opening it nearly a foot. Quickly, he jumped off the tables and ran up the stairway. Pressing his back against the door, he pushed upward with his still powerful legs. Finally, the dumbwaiter parts which had pinned down the door fell away and Jack was able to open it.

He peered over the top of the door and scanned the horizon in all directions. To the east, a huge line of tanks stretched for miles, throwing up a massive dust cloud. They were heading east at what appeared to be top speed. A most dangerous Chango was obviously mounting a blitzkrieg to push U.S. forces past the Continental Divide.

"Well," said Jack, lowering himself to the floor, "looks like we survived the biggest obstacle. We're alive and the guy who wanted us dead thinks he succeeded." He sat on a table and looked at her. "Do you feel like making a mad dash for Los Angeles?" His teeth began to clatter and he grabbed himself.

She shrugged. "How far away is it?"

"A long, long way."

"What about you?"

Jack chuckled, wiping sweat off his brow. "I think I'd be better off walking."

"Then let's start," she said, holding on to him until his trembling subsided.

4

After three days of walking and three nights of nightmarish *delirium tremens,* Jack and Moonfinch reached a ridge overlooking old Highway 93, which led to Ely, Nevada. Taking off his heavy backpack, Jack inspected what food and medical supplies they had left and shook his head. "We're going to have to play the part now. Think you can do it?"

She smiled, relieved that Jack was doing so much better. "Of course, I can. I can speak Spanish." She laughed. "I don't know why, but I can."

"We're man and wife and our last name is Garza, okay?" Unable to resist her smile, he smiled too. "We speak nothing but Spanish until we find out what kind of reception we'll get. We lived in Salt Lake City and just got liberated by General Quintero's troops."

She nodded.

He stood and stretched, then stooped to pick up the backpack full of their things.

"I wonder if we can get a bath in Ely?" she asked.

He groaned. "God, I hope so. We both smell to high heaven." He watched as she stood and pulled on her much lighter backpack. "How do you feel?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

"Okay," he said, amazed that she had regained so much of her mental capacity and strength.

None of the military vehicles passing them stopped, but soon an elderly Mexican-American in a very old truck pulled up ahead of them and offered them a ride to Ely. The old man told them that there was talk of a new People's Republic of California, which would include the entire West Coast. He quoted the new Spanish-speaking newscasters in Las Vegas as predicting doom for the U.S. The Alliance had broken through the Continental Divide, the final major line of resistance. From Texas, Alliance divisions had pushed into Arkansas, Oklahoma and Louisiana. The war had finally ended for the Europeans, Asians, Africans and Australians and the balance of power had changed radically. It was just a matter of time before World War III was over.

Reaching Ely near dusk, they found that hundreds of two and four-man tents had been erected for refugees and managed to get a small one for the night. It came with two uncomfortable cots, but there was a communal bath house just a few yards away, and the food in the mess hall wasn't bad. After

a hot shower and a meal of rice and beans, they retired to their tent and slept.

At daybreak, Jack awakened to the image of Moonfinch, sitting nude on her cot, staring at him. "Good morning," he greeted, yawning.

She watched him flex his biceps and throw off his sheet, exposing an erection.

When she didn't answer, he followed her gaze at his cock. "How do you feel this morning?"

She quickly met his eye and smiled. "I itch. How do you feel?"

"I feel a whole lot better. Where do you itch?" he asked, concerned.

"Down here." She pointed to her crotch, seemingly without any ulterior thoughts.

"Lie down," he ordered, assuming a clinical role.

She obeyed and he examined her opening.

"Do you itch inside or outside?" he asked, worried about having to go to a doctor to get a more effective antibiotic. He knew a doctor would ask questions about the obvious surgery. He was almost out of the synthetic estrogen and knew that it would be difficult to get without a good explanation.

"Just inside," she said, shuddering. Her face began to burn and she felt a surge in body temperature. Somehow she knew that she was experiencing sexual arousal, but it seemed alien and vaguely disturbing.

Putting on a rubber glove from his back pack, Jack swirled his finger around the inside of her vulva. "It's just the healing process. You have no infection." He strained to retain a clinical frame of mind but felt his cock become stiffer.

She shuddered again and he continued fondling her, entranced.

"Oh, yes," she whispered.

His clinical self wondered what effect surgically-induced amnesia had on sexual preference, if any. His physical self felt an intense sexual attraction to his "creation."

"I think I want you inside me."

"No," he whispered. "I'll hurt you."

She rolled up her eyes and reached for him. "Oh, God, don't stop, Jack. Please don't stop."

He lubricated his index and middle fingers with an anesthetic cream and slipped them inside her. Kissing her, he resumed the massage. At first he felt odd, kissing what had once been a man who'd tried to kill him, but quickly shook off the feeling. If anything, he had to quell a raging desire to fuck her, knowing full well that he would split her open. In seconds, she quaked and ruptured in climax.

As he muffled her cries with his mouth, he quickly masturbated, sending hot, silky jissom across her abdomen and healing breasts.

Several minutes passed as they lay on their backs, mesmerized by the hot breeze coursing through the tent. They held hands and stared at the ceiling, each thoroughly disturbed, yet somehow altered because of the experience. He pondered the mystery of sexual proclivity. She pondered the murky ambivalence slowly surfacing in her mind.

"Jack?" she asked, her voice colored with a slightly more mature timbre.

He recognized the change and turned to her. "Yeah, Babe." He felt strange, calling her that.

"What happened to me down there?" She nodded toward her genitals.

His throat constricted; his mouth became dry. He wondered why the question hadn't come up sooner and now he had to field it. "You were shot in the back of the head and . . . down there."

She looked at him and could sense that he was not telling her the truth. "That was my next question—my head." She squeezed his hand.

He became angry with himself and wanted to be honest. But he couldn't.

She suddenly sat up. "Jack?"

He turned to her, concerned. "Yeah, Babe."

She pressed her knees to her chest and rested her chin on them. "I have this feeling of helplessness." Tears spilled over her cheeks. "I can sense things, but I really don't know what's going on around me." She looked at him pleadingly. "Jack, if you can't tell me who I am and what my world was like, then at least tell me what I should be."

He sat up and studied her in amazement. "When we get to Las Vegas, I'll tell you everything." He ran his fingers through her hair. "Of course, no one could possibly know what you're going through. I try to grasp the fear and helplessness you must feel, but I just can't." He pulled her to him and kissed her on the cheek and forehead. "Whatever happens, I promise you this: I'll always take care of you and I'll never leave you. As a matter of fact, I think I'm already in love with you."

She gently placed her head against his big chest. "Somehow, I know what love is, although I have no memory of ever loving anyone. My God, I feel so close to you." She pulled back and looked at him intently. "But should I be loving you? Something pulls at me and tells me that something's wrong, but all I want to do is cling to you."

He stood and began to put on his clothes. "Come on, let's hit the road again." He looked at her somberly. "I'll get you to Las Vegas, and then I'm going to tell you the truth." He gulped. "And if you want to leave me, I'll not stop you. But if you stay with me, I'll never let you regret it."

She stood and began to dress. She was anxious to get to Las Vegas and find out who she really was.

5

In Las Vegas, Jack and Moonfinch were allowed to stay in temporary modular housing near the ruins of the old strip. They had a small refrigerator, a stove, a private bath and even central heating and air conditioning. The only catch was that both were assigned to public works—he, as a laborer and she, a filing clerk. She patiently awaited the revelation, which Jack never gave. But the more he suppressed it, the more it ate away at him.

Having been there less than a week, Jack became irritable and distant. An old pain in his stomach had returned with a vengeance. In spite of the stomach pains, he began to drink again. Soon he was drinking a pint each per day of rum and tequila, which were cheap and readily available. One night, he arrived at the apartment wired and on the verge of a breakdown. He didn't even greet her, opting for a stiff drink of rum and the television news.

She sat at the kitchen table, staring at him sadly. "It's time, Jack. We can't go on like this."

He took a huge gulp from the bottle and winced as the burning liquid hit what he assumed was a newly formed ulcer. "Maybe we'd better just split up." A rolling wave of intense pain moved up his abdomen, then subsided.

"Tell me, Jack," she said flatly, softly.

Another wave of pain hit him, and he nearly doubled over.

She grimaced. "Jack? What's wrong?"

"It's just gas." He straightened up and sighed as the pain drifted away. Quickly, he took another swallow and it flowed over the numbed lesion.

She felt chilled and held herself tightly. "Suddenly, I feel so very lonely—like you're not with me any more."

He took another gulp and felt it begin to work.

"You need liquor to tell me? Is it that bad?" Her eyes misted over.

Watching her tears well, he knew that it had to be done. He took a deep breath. "I'm a neurosurgeon for the U.S. Army," he began in a monotone. "I defected, along with Harwin and Bobby." He wanted to climb out of his skin. "Alvara, Cindy and Tina are transsexuals. We found them, mutilated by our peers from another camp . . ." His voice trailed off and he took another large gulp of rum.

Her eyes widened as a hideous picture began to form in her mind.

"We changed their genders in order for all of us to survive. It played perfectly—or so it seemed. We just wanted to wait out the war. Cindy and Tina had no regrets about what we did, but Alvara couldn't live with it." He sighed and trembled. "Oh, God, look at me." He laughed nervously. "Big bad Jack, almost shitting in his pants with fright."

She broke out in a cold sweat.

"So, along come you and this woman and suddenly, you're a real threat to us, and . . . " He took another gulp. "You and I got into a fight and you did this." He pointed to his eye patch, then met her gaze for the first time that night. "You ran off with the girl, and I went after you and brought you back." He shuddered. "I almost killed you there on the spot, but I wanted more revenge than that . . . "

"All along, I knew I was a man." Her voice was thin and lifeless.

He stared at her, waiting for the full reaction.

"I remember the chants . . . from when I was a child."

"The man who went berserk was your father. He's an Alliance general." Jack felt chilled, knowing that the information he was giving her could get him killed.

Moonfinch's gaze fell to her lap then back up to Jack's face. She shook her head slowly. "Is it any wonder why he did? A monster destroyed his son," she said, almost whispering it.

Instantly he became defensive, despising his previous self-humiliation. "Yeah, a monster. King Fucking Kong with a goddamn scalpel. Now, go tell the Alliance, so I can face a firing squad in the morning and get it the fuck over with!"

She slowly got to her feet and walked to the kitchen sink, bracing herself over it, almost vomiting. She looked down at her breasts and gently rubbed her crotch, tears streaming down her face. Stiffly, she walked to a closet and pulled out a light jacket.

"One more thing, my friend," Jack said.

She turned and looked at his feet, her hand on the front door.

"Your old man *abandoned* you—even tried to kill you. Alvara *abandoned* you. Everyone *abandoned* you . . . except me."

"Only after you turned me into a freak," she countered icily.

"You were a *threat* to me. You stabbed me in the eye with a fork. Can't you understand blind vengeance from someone as dangerous as I was?"

"A monster!" she shouted.

"A monster!" he confirmed. "Then!" His voice cracked. "But not now," he said softly. "All my life I've felt dead inside. I never felt any love for anyone. and when the war came, I stopped believing in God, love . . . anything *good*. It was like I was trapped on the dark side of the moon, and the only relief was in drugs and booze." He slowly approached her. "But something snapped when I saw how helpless you were." His expression softened and he tried to reach out for her, but she recoiled.

"For the first time in my life I felt guilt and self-loathing and when I dried out, I saw how innocent you were . . . how vulnerable." His voice cracked. "I love you, Moonfinch. Please don't leave me."

He tried to touch her again, but she stormed out of the apartment.

That night Jack lay in bed, unable to sleep. He wondered where she was and if she had gone to the authorities. He wondered when the pain would go away in his stomach. Gradually, it became constant and he felt like he'd swallowed a rock.

The next morning, he got up and drank a glass of water. Suddenly nauseated, he sat down. He felt pressure in his stomach and sensed a metallic aftertaste. Quickly, he went into the bathroom and sat on the commode, passing black fluid into the bowl. The nausea worsened; he felt faint. His vision dimmed from color to greenish to colorless, and he collapsed to the floor, vomiting coagulated globules of blackish red blood. Crawling to the front door, he opened it and yelled for help.

A calm feeling enveloped him as the ambulance delivered him to the hospital. The paramedics had already prepared i.v.'s and had forced saline solution into veins on both arms as his blood pressure dropped. Inside the emergency room, he was given an EKG, then propped up to have a tube pushed down into his stomach.

"Eighty over thirty and dropping," announced one of the nurses monitoring his blood pressure.

He felt himself slipping away.

A female doctor appeared. "Get him down!" she ordered.

A pair of hands pushed him onto his back as another nurse fumbled with the stomach tube.

"Just ram it home," encouraged Jack. "I'll keep swallowing."

The nurse finally got the tube into Jack's stomach and cold saline solution was pumped into it, then out. The clear, plastic tube passed by Jack's field of vision and he could see that it was bright red.

"Change, change," he whispered to himself.

And then it changed color to pink, then a lighter pink.

In the intensive care ward, a fragile-looking male gastroenterologist came with a stomach scope and injected a sedative into Jack's i.v. feeder.

Jack knew that he'd be unconscious in a couple of seconds. "It stopped bleed—"

He awakened to a commotion outside the ICU doors.

"You can't go in, *señora.* He's sleeping," said a nurse.

Then a familiar voice said, "He's my husband, goddamnit."

And then the doors opened and Moonfinch pushed her way inside. The nurse gave up and walked away, allowing Moonfinch to approach Jack's bed.

"Hi," said Jack, concerned over her swollen eyes and ashen complexion.

She gripped the end of his bed and closed her eyes tightly, tears seeping from under her lids. "I thought I'd lost you," she cried, softly.

He reached out and she took his hand.

"I close my eyes and there is only you, a man who says he loves me," she said, her voice quavering. "I can't see who I was, what I lost. How can I then mourn a loss I don't remember?" Tears burst forth. "You're all I have."

He pulled her toward him and she kissed him tenderly.

XIII

ALVARO AND THE GIRLS

1

Salt Lake City, Autumn of 1999

Alvaro, Cindy and Tina had been elevated to special concubines and learned how to control their respective colonel sponsors through sexual manipulation. Eventually, they were able to do as they pleased. As their sponsors were away to the front, the transsexuals stayed behind in luxurious adjoining apartments in Salt Lake City.

Alvaro ceased allowing himself to think about Moonfinch and suppressed the intense guilt which would assault him with a vengeance if given a chance. He thought only of Richard, the doctor who'd befriended him at Baxter Flats, and became obsessed with finding him, especially after hearing that many American doctors had been captured and forced to work for the Alliance. He volunteered to visit various military hospitals throughout the west to "cheer up the troops," but the colonel who "kept" him refused permission.

But the obsession was too intense, and Alvaro boldly exchanged sexual favors for transportation while the colonel was on duty near the front in Colorado. Alvaro had forged the colonel's signature on a letter of introduction, which effectively gained him entrance as an "entertainer" into various hospitals as far away as Arizona. Alvaro visited nineteen hospitals in just over two weeks and became depressed over not finding Richard. His obsession spawned frustrating dreams about the portly urologist, featuring fleeting glimpes of the doctor as

Alvaro climbed over obstacle after obstacle to catch up, only to find a stranger standing in Richard's place. Twice he dreamed of actually touching the doctor and caressing him, but only for a short period, followed by another fruitless chase sequence. Some mornings he would awaken weeping in frustration.

One day, all the colonels returned with news of an impressive rout of U.S. troops throughout Colorado. There was to be a party and the "girls" were sent out to shop for special gowns with a contingent of three guards.

The burly, blue-eyed Mexican staff sergeant gestured for the others to stay well back as he fired into the glass door with a riot shotgun.

"Hey, I ain't *ever* looted before!" yelled Tina, gingerly following the sergeant through the blown-out door of the chic Salt Lake City dress shop.

"Bullshit!" yelled Alvaro. "You've stolen everything from BMW's to bee pollen, you slut." He carefully slinked through, avoiding the jagged glass embedded in the frame.

Cindy looked around at the two Mexican corporals, armed with shiny machine pistols, standing guard on the curb. They smiled at her hungrily, prompting her to check out the basket of the heavier one. "Honey, you've not only got a huge nail, but the hammer to drive it with, too." She moaned, as May West would have done. Almost running into the door frame, she turned and slipped inside.

The sergeant had close-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair and the bulge of a substantial penis hanging down his right leg. Tina had already staked a claim on him and warned the others that he was definitely her's—provided it didn't get back to her colonel. The sergeant tried several light switches, but the power was off. In Spanish, he told Alvaro that there was probably enough sunlight outside to enable them to find good wardrobes.

The transsexuals went off in separate sections, looking for and trying on dresses. Alvaro found the tall women's selections and began checking out several gowns. Cindy found two cocktail dresses she liked right off and began looking for underwear. Alvaro found a dazzling, metallic blue evening gown and rushed over to show it to Cindy.

"Look at this, Cin. Roberto will cum in his pants when he sees me in this."

Cindy approved. "It's fantastic." She held up a white, sequined cocktail dress. "What about this one?"

"Utterly sinful!" Alvaro turned to see where Tina was. "Tina?"

Alvaro and Cindy looked into the darkness at the back of the store, but couldn't spot Tina or the sergeant. Muffled sounds of moaning and slurping caused Alvaro and Cindy to shake their heads and laugh. Finding large bags for their new wardrobes, they walked to the shoe department and began trying on shoes.

"So what do you think?" asked Cindy at length.

"About what?" Alvara was preoccupied with trying on a pair of lizard shoes.

"Where do you think we'll end up?"

Alvaro turned to her and sighed. "I don't even want to think about it, Cin." He threw the pair of shoes into the next chair. "I had my heart set on L.A., but it doesn't look like I'll get there."

"Would you be pampered this much if you were in L.A.?" asked Cindy. "Oh, what am I saying? This is ridiculous, isn't it? Here we are, the Three Stooges of whores, following three fat, sex-starved Mexican colonels into battle. We should have gone with Mona to Texas with that Brazilian general."

The sergeant gasped in climax, distracting Alvaro and Cindy momentarily.

"So where does it go, Alvara?" continued Cindy. "Where do we get off?"

Alvaro sighed heavily. "I don't know. Everything is so fucking crazy any more? War makes things so crazy, you know?"

"So what do you think they'd do if we cut out?" asked Cindy, knowing what the answer would be.

Alvaro slid his finger across his throat.

They heard a noise and turned as Tina appeared again, looking through dress racks. The sergeant, his face red, walked up to the store front; he looked casually out the window, making sure that the jealous and suspicious corporals could see him.

Eventually Tina joined them with a large bag full of clothing. "Oh—shoes," she said, looking through the display.

"How was it?" asked Cindy, softly.

"How was what?" Tina shot back, looking away.

"Oh, please—we heard you burp all the way back here!" snipped Alvaro, almost laughing as the sergeant blushed even more and walked out to the street.

"Shhhhhh!" admonished Tina. "He could get into serious trouble."

Cindy watched as the sergeant approached the corporals and said something, nodding toward the dress shop. "I truly doubt it," she said, watching the heavier corporal walk through the door and give Tina a hungry look.

Tina's mouth dropped as she noticed the man's basket. "Uhh . . . "

"Do it and die, you insipid *cunt*," spat Cindy, softly, but fiercely. "He's mine."

Alvaro and Tina looked on with envy as Cindy led the corporal into the back.

That night, the Mexican top brass hosted a victory party for high level military officers from Cuba, Brazil and Nicaragua. Taking over a plush Salt Lake City hotel, The Alliance turned it into a command headquarters and flew in the finest chefs and waiters. To Alvaro's amazement, most of the officers had mistresses in tow—most of them prostitutes from other countries. Alvaro wondered what the officers would think if they found out that three of the most looked-at mistresses were transsexuals.

Two days after the celebration, the reality of war resurfaced and the colonels had to go back to chasing U.S. troops out of Colorado. This time Alvaro, Cindy and Tina were forced to abandon their plush surroundings and follow their colonels in a large motor home, which was kept back at a safe distance. Shortly thereafter, the Alliance bogged down on the outskirts of Denver, and the weather began to turn colder.

Alvaro could sense hard times returning.

2

The first bit of hard times came in the form of a deadly epidemic of influenza. At first everyone wondered if it was biological warfare, a bit of engineered revenge by American microbiologists. But it turned out to be an exotic strain from Thailand.

Having been loaned out by his colonel to a Cuban general for political purposes, Alvaro missed the scheduled inoculations which assured immunity and had to travel to a field hospital south of Denver to get the vaccine. It was a hospital he'd visited before in his search for Richard. Driven there by the colonel's driver, they arrived just as six helicopters delivered tens of wounded soldiers from the front.

Alvaro went inside a mobile administration module, where a sullen female soldier/clerk told him that the nurse that normally gave the inoculations had been called to help out with the incoming wounded. Determined to get the shot, Alvaro walked to a large tent and slipped inside between stretchers carrying seriously wounded Alliance soldiers.

Inside, there was chaos as two male triage nurses examined each patient, directing the hopeless ones to a corner to die on a gurney and passing others to the middle sections, where doctors and nurses fought to save them. One of the triage nurses looked familiar in some vague way, but Alvaro shrugged off the feeling.

He moved away from the entrance and looked on in horror at the process of "playing God." In less than ten minutes, every gurney had been moved away from the entrance and the two triage nurses joined the others. Alvaro slowly walked by the first gurney, which held a young Hispanic woman with a gaping hole in the back of her neck. She wasn't breathing.

The next soldier was a young man whose chest was bleeding in several locations. He looked up at Alvaro with glassy eyes and held out his bloody hand. At first, Alvaro recoiled, but he couldn't resist the young man's haunting, wan smile.

Alvaro held his hand. "What's your name?" he asked in Spanish.

The soldier opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't.

"My name is . . . *Alvara.*" He brushed the young man's dark, matted hair away from his eyes and soothed his forehead.

The young man squeezed Alvaro's hand, then stopped breathing.

Alvaro began to cry and walked toward the middle of the large tent.

A stocky man dressed in a green gown and surgical mask walked by Alvaro, then suddenly stopped, turning around.

Alvaro contemplated the familiar eyes and grey hair. "Oh, my God," he whispered, his mouth falling open.

The man laughed. "Have a seat over there and I'll be with you in a couple of minutes." He pointed at a bench on the other side of the tent, then walked to a patient and finished bandaging a shoulder wound.

Alvaro studied the man's voice, trying to match it with the memory of a sweet voice back in Baxter Flats. He sat on the bench and covered his mouth with his hands. *Sweet Jesus, is it you, Richard? Is it really you?*

Then the man turned around and took off his mask. It was Bobby, now heavier and looking much older.

"Oh, shit," mumbled Alvaro, sick with disappointment.

"You're the last person I expected to see here," Bobby said, sitting next to him.

You're the last person I wanted to see, thought Alvaro. "I thought you'd . . . "

"Been blown to bits?" He chuckled. "You wish. No, Jack kicked me out of the complex and I was whisked away before the fireworks started." He seemed to enjoy Alvaro's shocked expression. "By the time I was reunited with Harwin, you girls had already shipped out."

"You look . . . so different," said Alvaro, still disliking him intensely, but less so for some reason."

He laughed and patted his stomach. "I'm about twenty pounds heavier and I'm clean now. I don't drink or do drugs any more." He looked around. "I speak fluent Spanish and I'm a well-regarded triage nurse. The Alliance has been good

to me."

Alvaro was bewildered by the shock of seeing Bobby alive and the realization that he'd probably never see Richard again. "So . . . where is Harwin?"

"In Denver. He heads up a vascular group there in the Santoro Military Hospital . I think it was called Methodist General before." He looked happy. "We see each other each weekend. The Alliance couldn't care less if you're gay, it seems."

"I'm happy for you," Alvaro lied.

"Look . . . I know you hate my guts, Alvara, but . . . "

"Alvaro," he corrected.

Bobby grinned. "Alva-RO."

"But what?" Alvaro prompted.

"But I just want to thank you for saving our lives."

Alvaro wondered what he was talking about.

"You could have disputed what Harwin said to that intelligence officer back in Utah, but you didn't. You could have had us killed . . ." He seemed to weigh his next words. " . . . like you did Jack."

I wouldn't have saved Harwin had I known that you'd survived, he thought. "The source of the evil was Jack, not Harwin or you."

Bobby shook his head. "War is the evil, kid. Jack wasn't some demon. He was a good man to me. He saved our asses from the U.S. Government and I was loyal to him. But war has a way of turning good people into savages. All that carnage." He pointed toward the corpses up front. "It warps your sense of values, and soon you're into the drugs and the alcohol." A painful memory seemed to tear into him. "And before you know it, you're someone else . . . warped . . . a freak."

"Do you think Jack's really dead?" asked Alvaro, not meaning to.

"Yes." He studied Alvaro. "Does he haunt you?"

"No," Alvaro lied, knowing that he'd somehow both loathed and lusted after Jack.

"How about Moonfinch?"

Moonfinch? Moonfinch is locked away with Siddiqqi and the box car massacre. "Moonfinch?"

"You killed Moonfinch, too. Not just Jack," Bobby said.

Bits of memory were flying around, retrieved, buried again. *The colonel, ordering three men to get the general's son as I suck his cock. Whoops! Too late! Screaming. Screaming. Explosions. Moonfinch! MOONFINCH! Silence. Restraints, a hospital. Then, peace as Moonfinch's memory sinks into the dark pool of my mind.*

"Are you okay?" asked Bobby.

Alvaro shuddered and willed the dark pool to calm. "Of course."

"Jack was drunk. He had his pistol ready to blow his brains out," said Bobby. "Even if he had the good sense to go into the bunker, the concussion from those shells would have killed him. Besides, Chango's troops would have seen the concrete and known there was a bunker."

"At night?" He shook his head. "My mother always said that demons were very hard to kill," Alvaro offered.

The sound of a helicopter rotor caught Bobby's attention. "So, why are you here?"

Alvaro sighed, then chuckled. "To get a flu shot."

He smiled. "I'll give you one. Let's go to the back." He looked warily at the entrance, obviously expecting more incoming wounded.

Alvaro balked.

Bobby strode for the back of the tent, then stopped when Alvaro didn't move. "You don't trust me?" He laughed loudly. "Fuck, I've got work to do." He turned.

"Wait!" Alvaro stood up. "I'm sorry. Yes, I trust you."

Bobby gestured with his head for Alvaro to follow.

Reaching inside a refrigerator, Bobby fetched a pre-loaded, disposable syringe from a box marked *Thai IV Flu* and deftly injected one into Alvaro's arm after a quick swipe from an alcohol pad.

Convinced that he'd not been poisoned, Alvaro wondered how Bobby would react to the question he'd always wanted to ask. "Who killed Herrera?"

Bobby quickly glanced at Alvaro, his campy affectation suddenly gone. "Why . . . Jack did, my dear," he said, trying to retrieve his inflection, failing. "Did you think it was me?"

"The thought occurred to me."

"I don't have the guts to kill like . . . like you." He smiled viciously. "Queens don't kill, honey. They read their enemy's beads."

Alvaro regarded him icily.

"But you wouldn't know anything about beeing a queen, would you?" Bobby's voice lowered. "You weren't even a good drag, let alone a transsexual."

As Bobby abruptly joined his peers, Alvaro retraced his steps to the front of the tent, glancing at the body of the young man whose hand he'd held.

He made his way to the car, where the driver was asleep behind the wheel. He felt unclean just being around Bobby. He thought of Harwin, practicing medicine in Denver, basking in prestige. *And after the war, they'll go into private practice and buy an expensive house in Colorado Springs and two Afgans and . . . live happily every after.* "It figures,"

he said bitterly.

3

Denver, Winter of 2000

As the weather deteriorated and the Alliance offensive bogged down on the outskirts of Denver, Alvaro began to worry that he wouldn't survive. In the midst of back-to-back snow storms, the Alliance's air forces couldn't fly, allowing U.S. mechanized infantry to counterattack and drive Alliance troops back into the mountains, where thousands froze to death or were killed by massive artillery attacks. Twenty-two days and four storms later, the weather cleared and the Alliance took the offensive with a vengeance. By the time the blitzkrieg was over, U.S. forces were driven beyond the Missouri River, whereupon the U.S. offered to surrender all territory west of the Missouri/Mississippi River. The transsexuals wept with joy when the news came from Caracas that the American's conditional surrender was accepted by the Alliance . . . that the war was finally over.

Having almost starved to death during the Battle of Denver, the transsexuals lost a great deal of weight. Worse, they all began to lose their femininity when they were unable to steal the synthetic estrogen they'd been taking. Consequently, they were rejected by their colonels and thrown in with all the other refugees.

One morning in February, Tina seduced a Cuban major into driving them to Stapleton Airport. She had convinced Alvaro and Cindy that Mexico City was the best place in which to start over. Rumors persisted that things were much better there and that jobs and housing were readily available. Knowing that they would have to wait a long time for an available flight, the three decided to get some sleep on the floor, surrounded by hundreds of other refugees.

As Alvaro drifted off, he thought back over the encounter with Bobby and how agonizingly disappointed he'd felt that Richard had not miraculously re-entered his life, that he probably never would. As if willing it, Alvaro began to vividly dream about the doctor . . . .

Richard kissed him passionately, smearing Southern Comfort-laced saliva over his mouth, neck and ears. They moved into a 69 position and voraciously feasted, shooting load after load into each other's throats. Alvaro blisfully hummed into Richard's crotch hair as he savored the sweet, intoxicating jissom. And then they were rolling down an embankment, laughing as sand coated their sticky mouths and cocks.

Still laughing, the ruddy-cheeked doctor jumped up and dusted off his smock, which was covered with blood. "I have to go back into surgery," he said, although his lips didn't move. He pulled up his surgical mask.

Alvaro sat up in the sand and looked down the hill at a tent with red crosses painted on it. "No, don't," he warned.

But Richard waved and strode toward the tent, calling back: "I'll always be with you, whatever happens."

The instant Richard walked into the tent, a missile arced over a distant mesa and descended upon the field hospital.

Alvaro bolted up into a sitting position, a cry suppressed in his throat. "Oh, my God," he whispered, stumbling to his feet and rushing to a less populated area. He stared out the window at the tarmac below, finally focusing on his own reflection in the glass. "Oh, my God," he whispered again. "He's dead." And then a strange warmth seemed to envelope him. "Richard? Are you here?" He glanced around the area, half expecting to see him. "Help me, Richard."

Alvaro paced up and down the concourses, watching one military flight after another take off, transporting troops and—when space permitted—refugees to other cities in Alliance hands.

Soon tiring of walking, he leaned against a post and watched as an old C-141 with Mexican insignia taxied to a gate across the way. It was the "casket" gate where baggage carts were stacked four high with plain, wooden coffins filled with dead soldiers, awaiting transfer to Los Angeles and beyond. Suddenly, he felt he had to try.

Reaching the gate, he pretended to be killing time by walking down the concourses. He walked casually by the gate. Eventually, one of the pilots caught his eye and smiled. He was young with an athlete's build, black hair and moustache. He blew a silent whistle as Alvaro struck a more provocative pose. As the pilot went back to the business of completing his manifests and discussing something with the other pilot and an official, Alvaro walked to the opposite glass wall and pretended to look out over the aprons, watching the pilot's reflection instead.

Completing his business, the pilot joined Alvaro and greeted him in Spanish. "You look so sad and lost."

"I am," he answered in Spanish.

"Where do you live?"

"Los Angeles," he said with a far away look in his eyes.

"I'm going to Los Angeles in about fifteen

minutes." He turned to look out at his aircraft and the caskets being loaded on. He smiled. "My passengers never complain."

"How about a live passenger?" he asked brazenly. "*Real* live."

He shook his head and smiled impishly. "Oh, how I wish I could." He sized Alvaro up and felt a surge of excitement. "But my co-pilot is a prude. Besides, there's no place for you to ride, except for a couple of empty caskets."

Alvaro made a face at the thought, then smiled alluringly again. "I would be extremely grateful . . . " He looked at his rank insignia. " . . . Captain. You just don't know how grateful I could be."

The co-pilot came from the gateway and nodded toward the rest rooms. "Be back in a minute and then we can get going."

The pilot nodded and watched him disappear into the men's room.

Alvaro looked at him pleadingly.

The pilot blushed. "You won't get me in trouble?"

"No way," he assured.

The pilot stared nervously at the men's room door. "There are two empty coffins near the front. Get inside one of them. I'll, uh . . . forget to fasten it down." He started for the men's room. "I didn't see you get on, and I don't know anything about it."

Alvaro excitedly ran to the gateway.

"Hey!" the pilot yelled.

Alvaro stopped and turned.

"Just leave a crack for breathing. Wouldn't want you to suffocate." He smiled.

Alvaro nodded and quickly ran down the ramp to the entrance of the low slung jet. Inside, his heart began to pound as he saw the tied-down stacks of coffins. Near the front were two that weren't tied down. He pulled at the top of the one closest to the cockpit. It was also next to a lavatory. Relieved to find it empty, he got inside and pulled the top in place, leaving a breathing crack. "Please, no one nail this fucker shut," he whispered.

Airborne just twenty minutes, Alvaro heard someone walk to the adjacent lavatory and urinate. He heard the commode flush, followed by footsteps toward the casket. The pilot pushed the casket top back and exposed a hard cock. Alvaro rose and gulped down his entire length, causing the pilot's knees to buckle. Starved for sex, the man lasted only two minutes, finally hobbling back to the cockpit.

An hour later, Alvaro was almost asleep when the pilot slid back the cover again with a semi-erect cock. This time, he took longer and was a little more aggressive, strongly pulling Alvaro's head onto his cock and forcing him to take the entire length.

By the time they landed in Los Angeles, Alvaro had blown the pilot five times.

XIV

ALVARO, FULL CIRCLE

1

Los Angeles, Summer of 2004

A heavier and more muscular Alvaro sat in a small chair in the examining room, struggling to stay awake as he read an outdated Venezuelan magazine. He had been waiting for almost 55 minutes, which was typical for a state-run medical facility. Life was tough in the newly created California People's Republic, but it was much better there than in any of the other republics, he reminded himself. After all, medical services were free. *And because of this new state, I am a man again,* he thought, his eyes brimming with tears of joy.

Ten minutes later, a tall, Hispanic doctor entered, only glancing at him before returning his gaze back to the chart he was reading. Bald and wearing wire-rimmed glasses, he wore a name tag that read, "Gutierrez, Rudolfo D., M.D., Urologia." Alvaro knew that he was Cuban and assumed that, if he was like all the other Cubans he'd known, he probably hated Puerto Ricans.

The doctor curtly asked him a question in rapid Spanish.

"Uh . . . " said Alvaro. "Could you please speak in English? Spanish is my second language and . . . "

"Of course," said the doctor, motioning for Alvaro to stand up. "Could you take down your trousers and sit on the edge of the table?"

Alvaro complied. He was very proud of his new cock and would gladly have walked through the entire facility exposed if necessary. According to the officials who briefed him prior to the surgery, the new appendage was actually bionic. It was made with a combination of state-of-the-art synthetic materials and the remnants of his own organ, which had been split and used by Harwin for the lining of his vagina. What was left of his penis had been retrieved and the tissue and vessels were actually fused with the material, so that his own blood supply could fill the new organ and create an erection. The remaining nerves were merged with electronic conductors, thereby enhancing signals going back to the

brain and stimulating sexual arousal. Although he had no testicles, that area of his brain which triggered climax would still create the sensation of climax and the bionic penis would throb accordingly. A synthetic testosterone pump had been embedded in his abdomen, ensuring that his body would remain masculine.

The urologist examined the penis carefully with latex-covered hands, probing the stitch lines. Instantly, the cock became hard and pulsating, prompting the doctor to cease the examination.

"Works okay, doctor?" asked Alvaro, smothering a laugh.

The doctor looked at him and smiled briefly. "Yes. I recommend that you not go out and fuck everything that walks for a while, however. Take it easy and allow everything to grow into one unit." He appeared amused. "Is that understood?"

"Understood, doctor." Alvaro's mouth opened in a wide grin.

Of course, he had no intention of taking it easy, but Los Angeles wasn't the same place any more. Man-to-man sex just wasn't as available as it had been in the 80s and 90s. Homosexuality was legal but loitering for and having sex in public places were still illegal and prosecuted viciously. Homosexuals were expected to stay out of sight and practice monogamy.

Many times he wondered if he should have settled in Mexico City with Tina and Cindy. He felt guilty, having left them without a word. He often remembered fondly the bizarre plane ride from Denver to Los Angeles. Upon landing, he had reported to a refugee center, where he was processed and asked if he wanted to return to his native Puerto Rico. Having no desire to face the family as a female, he had opted for citizenship and a job as a waitress. Later, when *Alvara* became *Alvaro* again, he applied for a job with the Los Angeles Police Department and was accepted.

Alvaro and his partner, a tough, ex-gang member from the old East L.A. section, were assigned to help clean up the now dwindling drug traffic problem. As each country in North and South America became socialist, most of the drug manufacturing cartels were forced out of business. Moreover, the new California government extended no constitutional rights and the police were able to arrest and imprison—and in some cases, execute—at will. But there were still pockets of resistance—mostly in the predominantly black areas, where there was a lingering hostility against the Hispanic and Asian majority.

One morning they received a call about a black man holding two narcotics detectives hostage at gunpoint. When they arrived, they found two other police cars in front of an apartment building and two policemen hiding behind each. Alvaro recognized one team but not the other. As his partner brought the car to a sudden halt, both men jumped out on the side opposite the building and crouched down with pistols drawn.

"I think he's killed one of the narcs." It was a voice Alvaro didn't recognize—one with a rich southern accent.

Alvaro looked in the direction of the voice and was immediately impressed with the speakers attractiveness. He looked a lot like Jack, complete with a stocky body, slightly dark complexion and graying temples. A moment later, he turned to Alvaro and smiled, flashing the most beautiful green eyes Alvaro had ever seen on a man.

"Welcome to the party," the older cop continued, glancing back at the building.

"Thanks," mumbled Alvaro, studying the man's huge hands and thick arms, gawking again at the unusually verdant irises. He was relieved that the resemblance to Jack didn't include the eyes. Jack's had been cruel and cold; the cop', radiant and friendly.

"Watch it!" yelled his partner, pointing to the figure of a man standing in a doorway.

Alvaro was startled and turned his attention to the house.

"It's okay!" shouted one of the hostages at the entrance to the building. "We're coming out! He's given up!"

Alvaro relaxed and glanced again at the older cop, who was smiling back at him, also relieved.

As the two detectives led the black man out of the house, Alvaro and the other uniformed police put away their pistols and milled around. Alvaro walked over to talk to the older cop.

"What a first day on the job!" he complained.

"First day?" questioned Alvaro.

"Just migrated. I was a cop in New Orleans."

Alvaro thought he might be Cajun. "That accent . . . "

"No, I'm not a Cajun." He laughed heartily. "Everyone asks me that. I'm Creole."

"I thought Creoles were black," said Alvaro.

The big man smiled splendidly. "There's probably some black blood in there somewhere . . . a little Spanish and French, too, I guess."

Alvaro felt very much at ease talking to him. "Nice to see them hiring Anglos."

The big man chuckled and shook his head. "Yeah. I had to prove that I was a Liberal Democrat."

They watched as the detectives cuffed their prisoner and placed him inside the unmarked squad

car.

"I'm from Puerto Rico," offered Alvaro.

The big cop nodded and smiled.

The smile was different this time, thought Alvaro, hearing all the squad radios announcing yet another assignment. *Did I turn him off or on?*

Alvaro's partner got inside the squad car and glanced at him impatiently.

"See you around," said Alvaro, reluctantly turning to join his partner.

"I'm usually at Toot's on La Brea after eight," the green-eyed cop said, not looking back for a reaction.

Getting inside the car, Alvaro's heart began to race, and his new cock felt as if it would burst through and roar like a lion. Then he unconsciously began to smile and drift off into an erotic fantasy about Green Eyes.

His partner gave him a puzzled look. "Seat belt."

"Sorry," mumbled Alvaro, reaching for the seat belt with a grin on his face.

2

Toot's was a small tavern with a big color television set and one pool table. The door was left open to the summer night, and there were only four patrons—all over 40 and, strangely, all Orientals. The bartender was a short, stocky Filipino-Californian in his fifties. Alvaro's feelings of nervousness were increased by the stares he received from everyone. Sitting at a barstool near the door, he nodded a greeting to the bartender, who smiled warmly.

"Yes, sir." The bartender placed a napkin in front of him.

Having no idea what to order, he asked for the first thing that came to mind. "*Dos Equis*," he said, his voice almost cracking with the stress of the moment. He glanced at the others in time to notice a couple of little smiles in response to his order. He wondered if they thought that he was with the Mexican hierarchy just because he ordered a fine Mexican beer.

By the time he had finished he looked at his watch and saw that it was past nine. He felt acutely depressed and debated whether or not to order another beer. Deciding to leave instead, he pulled a handful of pesos from his pocket and gave them to the bartender as a tip. Driving home, he felt an emptiness he hadn't felt in years.

Inside his simply decorated efficiency apartment, he watched a variety program in Spanish on the state-run channel. Quickly bored with it, he changed to another channel and frowned at a round table discussion on Socialism. He turned the set off and walked to the open window. He began to have second thoughts about living in California—especially if he had to live alone. He wondered what it would be like in Rio or Caracas. "Fuck . . . no difference," he told himself. He walked to his dresser and grabbed his wallet and ring. "Hey, you dumb fuck." He looked at himself in the mirror. "L.A. is the second biggest goddamned city in North America. If you can't find a cock here, you can't find one in Rio either." With that, he turned and left his apartment, almost knocking over the green-eyed cop, who was standing in front of the door with his hand up and ready to knock.

"Hey, you *do* live here," he said with a big grin on his face.

Alvaro melted.

Green Eyes' expression became tentative. "Is this a bad time?"

"No!" There was a hint of panic in his voice. "Uh...." He tried to calm himself. "No, I was just going out for some beer."

"Too late." He held up his watch and pointed at it.

"Oh." Alvaro showed him inside. "Uh, how did you find me?"

With hands stuffed into pockets, Green Eyes ambled inside and walked to the window, sizing up the apartment along the way. "I got to the bar late and Ramon said that you'd left." He turned and smiled. "So I checked with a girl friend at personnel."

Alvaro chuckled. "You knew my name?"

"Sure. Don't you know mine?" He exaggerated a look of shock.

Alvaro shook his head in bewilderment.

The big cop extended his hand. "Dupres. Bud Dupres." His voice suddenly sounded sincere for the first time.

The sound of his name gave Alvaro pleasure. "Uh . . . " He motioned for him to sit down. "Have a seat, uh . . . *Bud*. Can I get you something?"

"Beer?"

"Sure." Alvaro turned to get a beer, then remembered telling Bud that he was going for beer. He looked back at him sheepishly.

Bud laughed heartily as Alvaro fetched two bottles of Corona from the refrigerator.

"I got transferred to vice today," said Bud, taking a big gulp from his bottle and noticing the sudden strange expression on Alvaro's face. "That's why I'm running behind . . . . All the indoctrination shit."

Alvaro couldn't keep from laughing. *Of all the men in Los Angeles, I had to run into a vice cop.*

"What?" asked Bud, smiling, amused.

"Nothing." He struggled to suppress his laughter. "It's impossible to explain." He sighed, gaining composure. "Bud, you wouldn't fucking believe the crazy things that've happened to me the past few years. Sometimes all I can do is just . . . *laugh.*"

Bud studied him a little too long. "I think I know," he said, softly and absently, then wanting to rephrase, he said, "I mean . . . uh . . . I'm very understanding. I could probably understand."

Alvaro studied him, smiling slightly. He knew that an indiscreet move could get him kicked off the force. "I get that impression. You must have been a little on the liberal side to've come this far, huh?"

"You could say that."

"So . . . " Alvaro shrugged. " . . . was your liberalism confined to economics, or were you socially liberal as well?" He sensed Bud's caution and noticed the crumbling of his own.

"*Very* broad-minded," Bud said, with a heart-warming grin.

"That's what our liberators said," retorted Alvaro, with a twinkle in his eye. He was enjoying this sparring. " . . . but they've come full circle on some issues."

"Such as?" It was said quickly, as if Bud wanted the conversation to climax.

"Oh . . . individual freedoms." Alvaro thought for a moment. "Certain nonpolitical books have been banned. Sexual freedom—" He carefully considered Bud's expression. "—doesn't exist for certain segments of society."

"Bizarre, isn't it?" said Bud, betraying no revelations. "In many ways, we've gone from one form of conservatism to another, haven't we? One form of oppression to another. The U.S. government had become so goddamn barbaric that only a powerful push in the opposite direction could stop it. It was a lot like Germany in the late thirties and early forties. The ovens were going like crazy and the racist, right wing populace just sat on their fat asses, wondering what the sweet smell in the air was." He took a deep swig of his beer, seeming to examine Alvaro's wiry body. "How much do you know?"

Is he cruising me? "Pardon?" asked Alvaro, becoming lost in the surging chemistry he felt and hoped was mutual.

"About what happened before the war. Are you familiar with what happened out west with the camps?"

The word "camps" triggered an emotional reaction with Alvaro and he fell silent. He thought of the train ride from New York and the smell of decomposing flesh, then a kaleidoscope of memories swarmed over him.

Alvaro's sudden mood swing seemed to alarm Bud. He cleared his throat and quickly changed the subject. "I had some crazy things happen to me, too. Just before the war, I was a New Orleans police lieutenant."

Alvaro shuddered and cleared his mind. "What department? Vice?" He grinned roguishly.

Bud smiled and shook his head. "No. Intelligence. In the late eighties, we had an influx of neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan types. They started winning the local elections and things just went downhill from there. It suddenly became very *in* to be right wing . . . and my politics were always very left." He laughed bitterly. "We liberals became a dying breed. My wife left me and my kids even turned against me." He sighed. "Anyway, there was this group of university students who were very left wing and suddenly the police—and the FBI— decided that they were dangerous, of course."

Alvaro sensed a profound attunement building up between them. He sensed that Bud wanted to open himself up for scrutiny.

Bud continued. "The students were secretly financed by Third World interests, and they had this stupid idea that they could get by with assassinating some of these skin heads, you know? So, when we got all the goods on them, we planned a raid and the word came down from upstairs that they wanted the students wasted." His expression saddened. "I couldn't do that, Alvaro . . . couldn't . . . so I warned the students, but they traced the leak back to me." For several seconds, he stared at his bottle of beer, then said, very softly: "I ended up in prison and there was a bloodbath at the university anyway. There was no justice any more. All the students were just rounded up and they disappeared. And when the war was over, this Alliance representative interviewed me in prison and, next thing I knew, I was free."

"Looks like you got kicked in the teeth too," said Alvaro, wanting to tell him about his own experience, but knowing he couldn't.

"But that's not the worst thing that happened." He gripped the neck of his beer bottle tightly. "The Alliance asked me to point out the bad asses and . . . I did. I told them where they could find data on hit lists and who did the hits. I pointed out hundreds of the motherfuckers and watched them all die by firing squads. I had hundreds killed, Alvaro. Hundreds . . . " He trailed off.

Alvaro felt compelled to change the subject. "So, you got transferred to vice?"

For the first time, Bud exposed another facet. He seemed very wise and compassionate. His eyes betrayed the pain and suffering of war, tempered by . . . *a longing? Was he hurting in that area, too?* Alvaro felt the intense urge to crawl to him and gently place his head against the big man's chest.

Very seriously, Bud said, "Alvaro, I came

here because I thought I saw something." His eyes seemed to be misting over. "There's no facade here. What you see is what I am." His gaze became mesmerizing to Alvaro. "You can trust your instincts."

Alvaro began to tremble and whispered, "God, I hope so," then gently placed his beer on the floor. His face frozen with fear, he knelt before Bud and began to tremble uncontrollably.

Bud knelt as well, enveloping Alvaro in his big arms.

Both men began to laugh and weep in relief.

Alvaro's right eye popped open and focused on the magenta light coming through his east window. The eye then tried to focus upon Bud's massive, hairy chest, but it was too close. A rush of joy and lust rose in him, making his face burn, bringing his bionic cock to rock hardness. As Bud snored softly, Alvaro found a salty right nipple with his tongue. Suddenly, Bud stopped snoring and turned, eyes closed, flopping his left arm around the smaller man. Alvaro began to suck gently on the left nipple and Bud moaned. Soon, Bud's rising, dripping cock began to glide slowly across Alvaro's lower abdomen. Bud shuddered and flexed all his muscles, pulling Alvaro closer to him.

Alvaro reached down and touched Bud's slit, placing a drop of the potent elixir upon his tongue, savoring it, hurting for more. He slipped down Bud's torso and marvelled at the sight of the short, fat, uncut cock, spilling over with glistening precum. Enveloping it with his mouth, he spoke soft words with lots of "Ls," his tongue finding a new palette to strike. He swirled hot air down into Bud's pubic hair and around the full, heavy scrotum. His mouth was hot and slick; his tongue, elastic and protective against sharp teeth.

Bud moved into a 69-position and began to feast upon the rock-hard, high-tech entree. Like a Wagnerian procession, the coupling evolved slowly, with undulating, broad crescendos. Each time the flash point was within reach, both men held back allowing a slight cooling, then again became lost in a surging vortex of passion. And when it was time, Alvaro's throat dilated as he looked up at the trembling testicles with ever-tightening scrotum skin. He marveled at the spectacle of dynamic musculoskeletal movement, somehow resembling the wheels of an old steam engine struggling to gather speed. Bud pushed himself in all the way, his sweat-dripping testicles slapping loudly against Alvaro's forehead. Then no other sound could be heard, save that of a single, bull-like snort, heralding the arrival of Bud's semen.

Alvaro felt himself adrift and lilting upon a sea of liquid rapture. Releasing his own imaginary flood of jissom, he wondered if he had found the man with whom he would live out his life.

3

Five Weeks Later

Alvaro and Bud had moved into a two-bedroom apartment, seven blocks from the police station to which both were assigned. Although they refrained from being overly friendly at the station, neither cared what any of the neighbors might think about their living arrangement. Strangely, it was as if nothing had ever changed in Los Angeles, and no one paid them any attention.

Occasionally, both had the same day off, and they had a standing rule that free time would be spent outside the city. Therefore, one day at the crack of dawn, they prepared a picnic lunch and headed north toward the ruins of Lancaster and Palmdale, the sites of the largest manufacturing complexes for U.S. military aircraft during World War III.

"Where're we going, Hunk?" asked Bud, who sat on the passenger side, cradling Alvaro's head with his big hand.

Alvaro smiled and glanced at him hungrily, knowing that Bud's white jeans had nothing but succulent skin underneath. "A place I heard about once. Unless that big earthquake just before the war destroyed it, it should still be there.

The freeway had been severely damaged during the war and had never really been maintained since, creating an obstacle course of potholes and shoulder detours. There were other cars on the highway, but not anywhere near the number the freeway was designed to handle. It took three hours to reach the old Pearblossom Highway, just outside of what had been Palmdale.

"Have you ever been out here?" asked Bud, becoming concerned.

"Nope," answered Alvaro, grinning from ear to ear. "I saw it on an old map, and a girl I knew in Utah told me about it."

"What?" Bud gently punched Alvaro's shoulder. "Where in the fuck are we going?"

"The Devil's Punchbowl," said Alvaro, reminiscing momentarily about the time Cindy told him about it back at the bordello. The thought released a flood of memories and he wondered how he could ever tell Bud about all that happened. It was so totally unbelievable, he thought.

"What girl in Utah?" asked Bud, as an afterthought.

Which is exactly what Alvaro was afraid he would ask. "It's a long, miserable . . . *unbelievable* story." He sighed and shuddered.

Bud contemplated the strange look on Alvaro's face. "When the time's right, you'll be able to tell me about it. Maybe you can answer a few questions, like where your balls are and why you shoot dry." Then, after a long pause, he added, "But I reckon you don't know very much about me, either."

Alvaro drove on in pensive silence through one ghost town, then another, as Bud scanned the gateway to the Mojave Desert, which was now much less populated than before the war. Up ahead was a faintly legible sign which read "Devil's Punchbowl."

"I'll be fucked with butter," said Bud. "There really is such a place."

Alvaro's mood became more positive as he turned in the direction of the sign.

Since the original paved road had been washed out and was impassable, they had to walk the final two miles up a steep slope with large rocks piercing the surface at bizarre angles. Exhausted, they reached an old parking lot and lay down atop the broken asphalt. They looked up at puffy clouds against a vibrant blue sky and reached for each other's hands.

"This better be worth the climb," warned Bud.

Alvaro sat up and looked out over the Tehachapi Mountains and the Mojave Desert. "This can't be it." He looked further to his right and saw the ruins of several small buildings and picnic tables. "Over there."

Reaching the rim of the bowl-shaped, boulder-strewn canyon, they sat down and ate their picnic lunch, marveling at the scenery. The area was covered with redwoods, manzanita, Ceanothus and unusual-looking vegetation neither had ever seen before.

"See that?" said Alvaro, pointing at a tree with dark-red bark.

"Yeah."

"That's a manzanita," he said with authority. "It won't grow at the lesser elevations."

"Look at the birds," said Bud, pointing at two large blue and brownish birds."

"Uhh . . . I know." He smiled brightly. "Scrub Jays."

Bud pointed further down. "How about that little one?"

Alvaro squinted and frowned. "Looks like some kind of finch. Pine siskin? No. House finch? Probably that or a goldfinch."

"Hey, how come you know so much about birds?" asked Bud.

Alvaro's smile was mellow. "I like birds." He hugged Bud. "And I love you . . . . Let's see—no, it's definitely a house finch."

"What's a moonfinch?" asked Bud, squinting to see the little birds.

Alvaro slowly turned to face Bud, seriously wondering if the man had eavesdropped on his dreams. But Bud was preoccupied with the birds and Alvaro could see that the question wasn't loaded.

"Ever heard of that one?" prodded Bud.

"No. Why?" he asked, still stunned.

"This prostitute I busted uses the name." He looked at Alvaro. "I figured it was a real bird."

"Uh . . . there might be." Alvaro turned to look at the birds, afraid that Bud would see his expression.

"If I were straight, I'd really go for this girl," continued Bud. "She doesn't look like a prostitute, either. I told her that she should try to get into the movies in Brazil or Venezuela. I mean, she's stunning."

Alvaro turned and stared at him, his face turning pale.

"Long black hair, big brown eyes. Heard she was Apache."

"Where does she hang out?" asked Alvaro, his voice almost cracking with tension.

"In back of the old Farmer's Market downtown. She tricks with the drivers when they make deliveries early in the mornings. Why?" He could see that Alvaro had turned ashen and pulled him close. "You okay, Al? You look like you're sick."

Alvaro shook his head. "Must be the elevation. Maybe we'd better go back home."

XV

FOR THE LOVE OF MOONFINCH

1

Two Days Later

Alvaro feigned illness and called in sick at work. After Bud left for work, he dressed and drove to Farmer's Market. He knew that if Bud called to check on how he felt, he'd have to tell him the whole story, and that would prove to be traumatic. "I'll cross that bridge when I get to it," he mumbled to himself. He sat in his car which was parked in such a way that he could see all the trucks making deliveries. He watched from eight-thirty until almost ten. And then he saw her, stepping down from a truck cab and heading for another, its driver smiling in anticipation.

She walked like a two-legged gazelle, sure of every step, head high, her lips voluptuous and

bright red. Her raven hair was shiny, long and straight. Her breasts were full and perfectly round, and protruded above the top of the whorish red dress—the only sign of what she did for a living.

Ten minutes later, Alvaro watched as she descended from the cab and walked toward a bus stop on the corner. He remembered the first time he'd met her, when she was a he and he was a she. "When *she* was a *he* and I was a *she*, having been a *he*," he whispered, chuckling at the statement's absurdity in spite of the sheer heinousness of what had happened to both of them. "So you survived. And if you did, then Jack did, too."

Alvaro followed the bus for over four miles, scrutinizing disembarking passengers at every stop. Eventually Moonfinch got off the bus at a street called "Pearl Court" in a sleazy part of Hollywood. She stood on the curb at a crosswalk as the bus went past, then glanced at Alvaro as he stopped to allow her to cross. Seeing her voluptuous body up close, he could tell that she'd continued taking the hormones, which meant that Jack was providing for her.

As she cleared his car, Alvaro drove quickly to the next corner, hoping to get around the block fast enough to avoid losing her. When he reached Pearl Court again, she was nowhere in sight. "Fuck!" he shouted, hitting the steering wheel. He looked up and down the street, then turned left and slowly drove toward the spot he'd last seen her. Near the middle of the block he spotted a small grocery store and pulled over across the street from it. To his relief, she came out with a bag of groceries a short time later.

He followed Moonfinch to a small, rundown house two blocks away and parked around the corner. He took several deep breaths and pulled out his .38 service revolver, staring at it. "So what do you do if he still has that ten millimeter cannon?" he asked himself. *Walk away*, a voice said in his head. *Leave them alone. What is there to gain?*

"She has to know . . . and he has to face the music," he said, walking to the house with a pounding heart.

Alvaro rang a door bell and heard the voices of a man and woman, followed by the closing of a internal door.

The front door opened partially and Moonfinch peered around it. "Yes?" she asked.

Alvaro stared into her eyes and thought he could sense a growing recognition. He held up his identification. "Are you Moonfinch?"

She smirked. "Oh, shit! Don't you guys ever stop harassing?" She opened the door wider. "I suppose you want a freebie, too."

Alvaro slipped inside and scanned the inside of the house. From inside the living room, he could see the kitchen, dining room, back patio and a hallway leading to what he assumed was a bathroom and a bedroom. He pulled out his service revolver and held it out in front with two hands, then rushed into the hallway.

"NOOOOOOOOO!" she screamed from behind.

Seeing that no one was inside the bathroom, he contemplated the closed bedroom door and knocked it off its hinges with one kick.

The first thing he saw was Jack's eye, wide with shock, then he glanced down and saw that Jack's hands were under a blanket.

Moonfinch grabbed Alvaro's hands and stood in front of the gun. "LEAVE HIM ALONE! DON'T YOU TOUCH HIM!"

Tripping her with his foot, he pushed her to the floor and re-aimed the pistol, only to find that Jack's hands were still under the blanket. He hadn't moved.

"I thought that voice sounded familiar," said Jack, his voice only an echo of what it had been during the war. "It really is Alvaro now, isn't it? Just what you wanted."

Alvaro looked more closely at Jack, noticing that he was much thinner. His face was pale, his eye, dull and glassy. The patch over his left eye was faded.

Moonfinch stared at Alvaro, finally recognizing him. "Alvara?" she whispered, her voice quivering with fear.

"You want to kill me, Alva-RO? That what you want to do?" Jack shook his head sadly.

"I'm going to take you in, you creep," said Alvaro, his voice bristling with hatred. "I want you tried for war crimes."

"Oh, God, no, Alvaro. Please, no." begged Moonfinch, crying openly.

"Shut up!" Alvaro yelled, keeping his gaze on Jack. "You don't know shit! Your brain's been fried with a laser. He's a fucking monster!" He turned to her. "What do you think, that he's your old man? Is that what he told you?"

She slowly rose. "I know everything," she said softly, whimpering.

He stared at her in disbelief, then looked at Jack for confirmation. Jack merely nodded and looked down at his knees.

She looked at Jack. "He saved my life after my own father abandoned me," she said in a monotone. "*You*, Alvaro! *You* abandoned me, too, and left me to die. *You* left me there." She held her head high and looked proudly at Alvaro. "Just before the shells came, I saw him change. He shielded my body with his own." She sat on the edge of the bed, her

eyes unblinking. "He said he would never leave me, that he would take care of me for the rest of my life."

Alvaro's arms began to shake more and his hands began to sweat. He felt ill.

"He's asked me to forgive him every day since, and every day since, I have." Her voice began to rise. "We can't go back. We can't undo the . . . craziness of that war. I might have been a man, but now I'm a woman." She placed her hand on her chest. "I have to live with that. And as a woman, I have nothing but him. He's all I have in the world and he loves me."

For the first time, Alvaro noticed the wheelchair in which Jack was sitting; the pistol began to shake. "You slime!" he yelled, crying.

"Last year he had a stroke," she continued. "He's holding on just for me, and I work the streets for him." Her voice began to crack again. "Do you know what it's like to love someone that much?"

Alvaro stared at her as if he'd been slapped. The sweet, ephemeral memory of Richard surfaced in his mind, followed closely by the vivid memory of Bud. He shook it off. "Moonfinch, you can be helped. I can help you get this abomination reversed. Look at me. There are new drugs, bionics. You can be a man again."

"No, Alvaro."

"But you were a *man*, Moonfinch--a testosterone-reeking, goddamned man! You weren't like Tina and Cindy. Why?"

"Because I have no identity as a man," Moonfinch said quietly, calmly. "When Jack told me the truth, at first I was outraged. I struggled to find that man I was and to retaliate, kill him, turn him in . . . *something*. But then it came to me that I was no longer a man because I had no memory of manhood. I had no family because my father had me put to death. All I had was Jack, for better or worse." She looked at Jack lovingly. "Jack's asked me many times if I wanted to go back to manhood, but I don't want to. I have an identity. I don't want to change again." She touched jack on the shoulder. "He's my father, my best friend, my little boy . . . my lover."

But Alvaro's sense of outrage could not be appeased, and he wrenched his attention back to Jack. "No, Moonfinch. He's a *cockroach!*"

Then Jack spoke in a frail voice: "Me . . . a cockroach? And what about you, Alvaro? What are you?"

Alvaro frowned.

"You were a junkie—a cheap hustler—before you were sent to the camp." He shifted painfully in the wheelchair. "Remember those blood tests we gave you . . . and we came back to you again and again for more blood?"

Alvaro remembered, but remained silent, his hand straining in agony.

"You carried an antibody, Alvaro. Had nothing to do with HIV or Cythrax. Would you care to guess what you were immune to . . . but spread like wildfire?"

Alvaro looked at him in horror. Suddenly, he had a flashback to a filthy, foul smelling room in Manhattan and a man holding a syringe with green liquid.

"You killed *thousands*, Alvaro."

Alvaro's neck veins protruded, and his face became crimson. "No! You're making this up, Jack. No!"

"Fuck, man, you *wiped out* half of New York City and you have the outrageous *gall* to call me a *cockroach?"*

"NO!" Alvaro yelled, grabbing Jack's throat and pressing the gun's muzzle against the frail man's temple.

"No, Alvaro!" Moonfinch warned, her voice now menacing.

Alvaro could sense that she held something metallic and shiny near his ear, but he never really addressed it. Instead, he stared into Jack's flat, calm eye and realized that the man was telling the truth. A sob generated from the bottom of his throat, but he suppressed it with a moan. Slowly, he lowered the pistol and silently left the room. He walked to the front door and slipped his revolver into its holster.

Moonfinch closed the bedroom door behind her and opened the entrance door for him. She was carrying Jack's 10 millimeter pistol.

Tears streaked down Alvaro's face. "For what it's worth, I did everything I could to get you out before they started firing. I didn't abandon you in that sense. But I almost got you killed trying to get even with Jack. I've lived with that guilt for so long." He reached out and touched Moonfinch's cheek.

Moonfinch smiled, touched by his concern. "Had I been taken from Jack, Chango would have had me killed, rather than allow me to live as a woman . You did the right thing, Alvaro. I'm alive. I'm happy. I have no idea what it's like to be a man. You mustn't let it haunt you any more." Her eyes were like black sapphires. "Take care, Alvaro." Her lips formed a tiny smile.

Wiping his eyes, Alvaro turned and nodded, then walked out to the street. Approaching his car, he could feel the dogs of insanity sniffing at his heels as all his defensive mechanisms defaulted. All the repressed emotions came flooding out like hot oil. He rushed to his car, eager to envelope himself inside a protective shell. He sat behind the wheel for several minutes, staring at the surroundings, which seemed altered. *Was it the color? Yes, the greens are not as vibrant. Everything's washed out.* He stared at tall Eucalyptus tree and almost panicked as it began to transform into a giant praying mantis.

2

When Alvaro walked into the apartment, Bud was sitting on the couch, glaring at him. "Where in the *fuck* have you been?" Bud stood and approached him, looking for an answer. Instead, he found a man he'd never met before.

A shattered Alvaro sank down onto an ottoman. "Bud?"

Bud reached down and held Alvaro's face with his hands, recoiling at the coldness of his lover's skin. Looking in Alvaro's eyes, he could see a man hanging over a precipice. "Oh, my God, baby. Oh, my God, what's happened to you?" He fell to his knees and held on as Alvaro broke down.

Alvaro's pulse quickened as the room began to close in on him. He held on to Bud, the only object in the room that seemed real. "Bud—I have to walk. Let's walk." His face registered a growing panic; his breathing became shallow.

"Al, listen to me," said Bud. "Are you having chest pains? Does your head hurt?" Bud walked to the telephone.

"No, don't call an ambulance. It's not physical, baby. It's mental and they'll just lock me up."

Bud looked at him helplessly.

"Those tranquilizers you have in the medicine chest."

Bud rushed into the bathroom and fetched the pills, reading the label. "They're outdated."

"Let's try them anyway," mumbled Alvaro, struggling not to hyperventilate.

Bud quickly got him a glass of water and gave him two pills, which Alvaro took.

"I have to walk, Bud. I'm gonna beat this."

Alvaro glanced at Bud repeatedly as they ambled through a small park. Although he wasn't hallucinating, Alvaro still didn't trust the surroundings and kept Bud in sight, lest he fall into an abyss of raging insanity. He avoided speaking because he was sure that what he had to say would not make sense. And then the pills began to work, and a wave of serenity drifted over him. A sense of normalcy returned to his brain. "It's working. Thanks."

Bud sighed in relief. "Okay. What happened?"

Alvaro slumped on a park bench, looking up at Bud helplessly. "Where do I start?" His voice was frail and almost pleading.

Bud sat, discreetly massaging Alvaro's neck. "We've got all night, partner, and nothing is more important to me than you."

Alvaro looked at him and realized for the first time that Bud was indeed the love of his life--that one of them, one day, would have to go through the awesome grief of losing the other. He found himself wishing that both he and Bud could die at the same time. "When I came out in Puerto Rico, I flipped for this guy and moved to New York." He studied Bud's already stunned expression and wondered how his lover could possibly grasp such a bizarre story. He shuddered and pulled his feet up to the bench, resting his arms on his knees. "I became a hustler . . . and, later, I became a junkie." He swallowed hard. "Today, I found out that I was a carrier for the 'white plague,' Bud. I remember going to my pusher's apartment and this . . . this really out-of-place guy answered the door. My regular source wasn't there, so this man—I know now that he was a terrorist—he gave me a hit of ozone. It was so pure that I was wasted instantly, you know? And later he brings out this green shit and injects it into my arm." He shook his head forlornly. "That must've been it. And I was so clean, too. I never got infected with HIV or Cythrax. I was so careful."

Bud's face tightened grimly.

"I . . . " Alvaro tightly closed his eyes, not wanting to go on, but knowing that he had to. "I must have infected those . . . I . . . uh . . . had five, six tricks, I guess." Tears streamed down his face. "Oh, Jesus." His voice cracked.

"It wasn't your fault," offered Bud softly.

Alvaro wiped his eyes and found his voice. "That night, I was arrested by the fucking . . . Gestapo. And next thing I know I'm on a boxcar, headed for Utah." He laughed bitterly. "The place was crawling with doctors, man. They were everywhere. They said that we were there under quarantine, that we were . . . *high risk,* you see. But we never had any blood drawn, Bud. No one ever did a test to see if we were infected with Cythrax . . . . No." He suddenly felt a chill and pressed his knees to his chest. "Next thing you know, I was in surgery and when I came out . . . " He drew a deep breath. "When I came out of the anesthesia, no one would tell me what they'd done. " He thought of Richard. *Except this one urologist,* he almost said. Falling silent, he smiled as the memory waxed and waned. Somehow, he knew that Richard was no longer with him.

Bud kneaded Alvaro's neck harder, his face turning pale.

"Later, I found out that . . . in the name of science . . . they'd implanted a synthetic bladder and taken out my prostate gland." His voice cracked again. "They'd . . . uh . . . implanted an experimental plastic urethra, but . . . " He rubbed his legs. "But it got infected and they gave me these pills and I guess they didn't have any effect."

Bud cleared his throat and stood quickly. "Let's go back. You can tell me tomorrow."

"No," said Alvaro emphatically.

Bud slowly sat again and pressed his hands into his crotch.

"Somehow, blood couldn't reach the head of my dick and gangrene set in." His feet slipped and fell to the grass below. He bitterly smiled. "Of course, that brought them another medical challenge. They jumped at that one and even argued over how much they'd cut off."

Bud appeared to reel and began to purposely breath deeply and evenly.

"Then, one day this stealth fighter came and destroyed the camp with a fuel mist bomb . . . and just about everyone was incinerated. Four of us were on a work detail away from the buildings. We were repairing some fencing and there was this ravine half filled with snow. I saw the plane streak over and drop these canisters attached to parachutes. They were spewing out a mist . . . and then I knew and warned the others to jump into a ravine and bury themselves in the snow. And we did just as something ignited the mist. The explosion wasn't piercing like a conventional bomb. It was a gigantic *whump*, and it sucked the air out of our lungs. It melted all the snow and I felt my skin burning. It took me a long time to get my breath back . . . I had to give mouth to mouth to my friend Tony and another guy to get them breathing again." Alvaro drifted off and stared out at nothing in particular for several moments, playing the scene over and over in his mind.

Bud appeared numb and did likewise.

"We survived somehow, even though the fence . . . it . . . melted in spots." He rubbed his legs briskly. "My good friend, Tony, was burned too much and . . ." Alvaro choked back tears. " . . . it got to where we had to carry him. When Jack found us, there were three of us left, all mutilated . . . all candidates."

"Jack?"

"Colonel Jack Deegan, also known as Ibapah Jack, our savior. Of all people to be saved by, we had to be saved by two deranged surgeons and a male nurse. He was the man with the plan!" He crossed his legs and turned to face Bud. "You ready for the punch line?"

Bud looked at him helplessly, finally nodding.

And then Alvaro told him all about the happenings at Ibapah Jack's whore house.

3

Los Angeles, Three Months Later

"I hear she moved," said Bud over breakfast.

"Who?" asked Alvaro, trying to seem indifferent. He'd pretended not to care when Bud brought up the subject earlier.

"I heard that she's working the beach now. I think she lives in Redondo Beach. Maybe Jack died."

Alvaro looked at him and sighed. *He knows me so well. He knows I have to find out.*

"You off today?" asked Bud.

Alvaro nodded, then couldn't help but smile. "You?"

"No."

"Call in sick, then, and let's go."

Bud drove the entire length of Redondo Beach, then back to the north end. Eventually, he parked the car on the street above the beach. Both men got out of the car and walked to an overlook with pipe railing. They scanned the beach fifty feet below, then looked around on the street level. Seeing no sign of Moonfinch they returned to the car. They drove to the next overlook a few blocks down the street, then got out again and repeated the process. After searching the beach for over an hour, they drove the side streets, finally stopping at a diner on Pacific Coast Highway for coffee.

After coffee, Alvaro suggested one more pass down the beach and Bud reluctantly agreed.

Near the south end, they both saw her at the same time; Bud pulled the car to the curb.

A woman in a black dress and shawl stood at the rail facing the sea.

"I have to see if it's her," said Alvaro.

Bud said nothing, following Alvaro across the street. Alvaro stood on the sidewalk fifty or so yards away, watching Moonfinch at an angle. Her gaze was locked on the sea. Her shawl and hair billowed in the wind. She seemed so desolate.

"He's gone," whispered Alvaro. "She's alone now."

Bud shook his head. "What do you think she'll do?"

"I don't know."

"What do *you* want to do?"

Alvaro shook his head sadly. After several moments of pensive silence, he said, "Go home and live my life with you."

They crossed back to the car and Bud drove away.

Alvaro stared at Moonfinch until she faded from his vision. At that moment she ceased haunting him.

4

"Aren't you getting cold?"

Moonfinch turned and smiled as Jack approached her, walking with a cane. His color was back to normal and he had gained weight, filling out his face. He now had a new glass eye.

"I walked two miles, young lady," he boasted.

"Next week, you do four," she ordered.

"Yes ma'am." He pointed in back with his thumb. "See that white-haired guy back there, talking with those two women?"

She looked and spotted the man. "Yeah."

"He told me the Ministry of Health's decided to offer examinations for licenses to American doctors."

"Examinations?" She became excited.

"Yeah, for those doctors whose credentials can't be verified because of the war. They must be hard up for doctors."

She kissed him lightly on the cheek, and he placed his arm around her shoulder. Both looked out to sea.

"So what do you think?" she asked, at length.

"I think I can pass the exam," he answered. "Who in the fuck has a history any more? What're they gonna do, check my social security number through Washington?"

She pinched his cheek. "You're so *smart*, Jack Deegan." She snuggled up to him. "Before we know it, you'll be doing surgery again and we'll be living in a *house* instead of a small apartment."

He beamed at her. "And you can stop working the streets."

They turned and walked to the bus stop across the street, holding hands and swinging them like two children.

EPILOG

Meanwhile, in Sao Paulo, Brazil

The casket lay draped in a Brazilian flag. Two soldiers in brilliant, stainless steel helmets slipped the flag away and folded it, finally presenting it to the widow.

Mona, her face enshrouded in a black veil, reached for the flag and laid it in her lap. She stared at the casket and felt a wonderful release.

As Mona and the little boy were escorted away by a Brazilian Air Force colonel—followed by an entourage of highly decorated officers and women dressed in black—the casket slowly sank into the earth.

Riding in the back seat of a sleek black limousine, Mona looked down at the boy and patted his knee. The little boy, nearly seven, looked up at her with tear-filled, dark brown eyes.

"You loved him so much," she murmured, shaking her head.

He nodded his head, trying not to cry.

"You have to be brave now. He'd want you to."

"I know." He shuddered, looking out at the overcast countryside. "But . . . "

"But what, sweetie?"

He turned and looked up at her pathetically, tears streaming down his face. "Why do we have to go away?"

She drew him close. She hadn't the heart to tell him that there had been a doubt all along, that a blood specimen had been taken to confirm it. She couldn't bring herself to tell him that his father, the great General Obidos, wasn't his father after all.

Able to leave with ample money to live well, she took the boy to Phoenix, in the California Peoples Republic. Of course, she had no memory except that of the pathetic, zombie-like transsexual, but that memory haunted her. She found herself juxtaposing the sets of eyes for comparison. And then she was sure.

Mona and the boy sat quietly in the cavernous reception area, where they had waited for over five hours. The day before, they had waited six hours to no avail. They weren't alone in waiting to see the governor. An archbishop and his entourage waited, growing more hostile by the hour. A group complaining of food shortages became more and more restless.

"Momma?"

She looked down. He'd been so quiet that she had almost forgotten him.

"I have to use the bathroom."

She nodded and accompanied him to the entrance of a large men's room off the main corridor of the capitol building. "Don't get lost."

"Oh, Mom," he grumbled, going inside.

As she paced in front of the rest room, she could hear loud voices coming from the reception area. It was obvious that tempers were rising. She watched as security guards inched closer to the fracas. She sighed and decided to come back the next day.

The boy came out and walked toward her. He was very tired and had not eaten since that morning. She felt guilty.

Suddenly a man with long silver hair and dressed in traditional Apache garb quickly slipped through a door further down, followed by two armed guards.

She ran to him, prompting the guards to swing around and aim automatic weapons at her.

She stopped suddenly and held up her hands,

gulping at the sight of the muzzles. "Governor Quintero, please listen to me!" She turned to the boy. "Moonfinch, come here."

Chango's eyes darted from Mona to the boy, finally resting upon the boy.

Little Moonfinch, looking as Apache as anyone could, walked to the side of his mother, staring in awe at the big man with silver hair.

"I was at the bordello when your son died. Do you remember me?"

Chango glanced at her, then continued staring at the boy.

Mona studied the hard black eyes and thought she could feel the aura of a strong emotion.

He considered her again. "No. I don't remember you," he said, flatly.

"Governor!" shouted the archbishop, approaching briskly from the reception area.

Chango abruptly turned and rushed toward a side exit, his guards scurrying to catch up.

"No!" Mona called out, running after him, almost pulling Moonfinch off his feet.

The archbishop and two members of his group reached the side exit at the same time as Mona and the child. Mona snarled at the church official and viciously pushed him aside, pulling Moonfinch through the doorway. A limousine pulled away swiftly, the governor sitting in the rear, glancing back at her, then at the archbishop, who had caught up. The archbishop threw up his hands in rage and stormed back inside.

"Fuck!" Mona screamed. "Motherfucker!" Tears streaming, she reached down and picked up her son.

"*Señora*," said one of Chango's guards, standing behind another limousine. "You will come with me, *por favor*."

The house sat upon a rocky hill overlooking Phoenix in the distance. It had an awesome view. Open and airy, it was an adobe house with three bedrooms and three baths. The floors were dark-red tile with thick, expensive rugs throughout. All furnishings were in earth colors, and Indian artwork adorned the walls.

Moonfinch followed after a matronly Apache cook, who obviously fell in love with him instantly. Mona sat out on a terrace, drinking a double Scotch and wondering what Chango was up to. Then, as the sun had almost set, she saw a pair of headlights leaving the main road.

As the limousine reached the house, it disappeared into a huge garage. Two minutes went by and she began to feel uncomfortable. She turned around and found Chango staring at her from the terrace door.

"Oh! You frightened me."

He looked down. "I'm sorry." He glanced back into the house.

She stood up, watching him cautiously. Following his gaze, she saw Moonfinch sitting on a couch, petting a cat and studying Chango with great interest.

He looked back at her, clearing his throat. "Tomorrow, we'll have blood tests done and compare them with mine. If he's my grandson, you'll both be well provided for." He gestured with one hand. "All this will be yours."

She approached him and looked fondly at her son. "He's your grandson." She smiled. "Anyone could see he is."

His face darkened. "That night was the worst night of my life. I went crazy." He shook his head, sadly. " I was almost relieved of my command." He walked to a chair and sat, looking out over the last of the sunset. "The other . . . *women* told my officers about what this man, Jack, did to you and my son." He looked at her. "I'm sorry."

She sat next to him. "I don't remember your son, but apparently we were in love. I was pregnant when I went to Texas with General Obidos."

He smiled. "*The* General Obidos?"

"Yes. At first he thought it was his son, but the arithmetic finally sunk in." She shook her head. "He was such a fine father to Moonfinch. Everyone thought the general was the real father. My husband insisted that we not tell Moonfinch until he was older." Even in the near darkness, she could tell that Chango's eyes had softened and become moist.

"I want to tell him the truth," said Chango softly, looking out over the desert. "He must know that he's a noble warrior."

Mona heard a sound and turned to find Moonfinch standing in the doorway, holding the cat. She could tell that he had heard it all.

Chango turned and stared at Moonfinch for several seconds, then held out an arm. "Come, young man."

Moonfinch shyly walked to him, fascinated.

Chango lifted the boy and cat into his lap. "You know, this cat never lets anyone hold her. She must think that you're part of the family."

THE END

Special thanks to my beloved editors, my life partner, THE FRIAR, and THE VIKING for their tireless editorial efforts. Without their help, this novel would never have been possible. Thanks also to KENN RICHIE, OCHO, XYLOPHANG and CLAY HOWARD for reviewing the latest draft.

P.H. Colley

GALLERY

ARTISTS

BUCKO (pages 82 and 83) is a stocky, hefty, 60-year-old American/Asian who lives on the Eastern Seaboard with a buddy. He's an avid sports enthusiast and top-notch writer.

CHARLES OF FRANCE (page 84) is a 38-year-old Frenchman studying temporarily in New York. He lives in France.

COYOTE (page 86) is 34, lives in West Texas and loves masculine, older men . . . but he's open to rapport with anyone serious about their truth.

WALT HENRY (page 85) is a professional artist who lives in Michigan and has a special interest in drawing men. He says, "The older man is much more exciting."

KOALA (page 88) is a young, medium-weight Oriental guy living in Australia and working throughout Asia as a photojournalist. He's interested in corresponding with chubbies/chubby chasers and getting suggestions on what kind of drawings CR readers desire.

RAM (front cover) is considered one of the best erotic artists in the world today. This highly celebrated artist is in his fifties and lives in the Midwest. A regular contributor since 1986, RAM came to our rescue when we were frantically looking for the kind of artwork that would turn heads and help get us started. He gave us a potent shot of prestige and we shall be forever grateful. This beautiful man is currently picking up the pieces after the tragic loss of his lifemate to cancer.

SAM (outside back cover) is a 47-year-old watercolor artist of Japanese descent. He paints flowers, landscapes and animals. Until he found CR, he painted chubby nudes just for himself.

WOLF (page 87), 54, was artist in residence at the American College of Switzerland during '69 and '70. A McDowell Fellow, he graduated from Pratt Institute in '58 and Massachusetts College of Art in '57.

MODELS

BAMA (page 97) is 51 and lives on the East Coast. He's interested only in sincere seniors, 60 plus, for friends and lovers. When he made his debut in our April 91 issue, we figured he would be a hit, but had no idea he would break records. You might find this hard to believe, but BAMA sent us that April photo and asked if we thought it worthy enough to use in CR. He said that he had sent it to two subscribers who never

responded, and he wondered what was wrong with his looks. We almost fainted. He probably sent the photo to a couple of guys who were on vacation . . . and were they probably pissed when they got back and saw what they missed out on!

BULLFINCH & KENT JUSTICE (inside front cover, photo by HARRY). BULLFINCH, left, is 61, 5'-7", 155#, and one of the most popular models we've ever presented. A retired engineer, he lives in the Midwest and is free to travel and meet relationship-oriented guys, 21-50. KENT JUSTICE, one of the finest men alive and a co-founder of CR, is a very talented writer, model, artist, photographer and videographer who lives with his CR model lover (THE COLONEL) in Southern Mississippi.

DENNY & BIG MAC (page 96) are a couple of 24K beach bums from Orange County, California. MAC, 61, and DENNY, 36, are a fun, sharp couple and seek singles and other couples who are equally fun and sharp.

THE GARDENER (inside back cover, photo by BERNARD) is a 60-year-old Teddybear living in Brugge, Belgium with his 36-year-old lover, BERNARD. They enjoy traveling, cooking, pen pals and visitors. They'll be visiting the U.S. this summer, but I understand that they're already booked solid from Florida to California. Even the FRIAR and I will be lucky to see them.

KORV (page 91) is a potter and teacher from Southern California. He's single, 5'-10", 190#, clean, honest and an Aries of Swedish descent. "Korv," by the way, means "sausage" in Swedish.

MACK (page 93) is 56, 5'-11", 235#, brawny, hung, highly educated and bisexual. Heaven is getting this powerful *man's* man into a sling and making love to his 8" X 7" (around) cock, balls and prostate. He's married, discreet and lives in Orange County.

MR. X of SAMSON MAGAZINE (page 95). This popular SAMSON model has fallen out of touch with SAMSON's publishers, who are trying to locate him and tell him about all of his new U.S. fans. We'll let you know if he's located. You Japanese subscribers . . . does anyone know this succulent, haunting man?

THOM (page 90) is a 67-year-old, rugged, outdoors type who retired from the construction industry and now lives in the Florida panhandle. He enjoys the company of masculine, younger men.

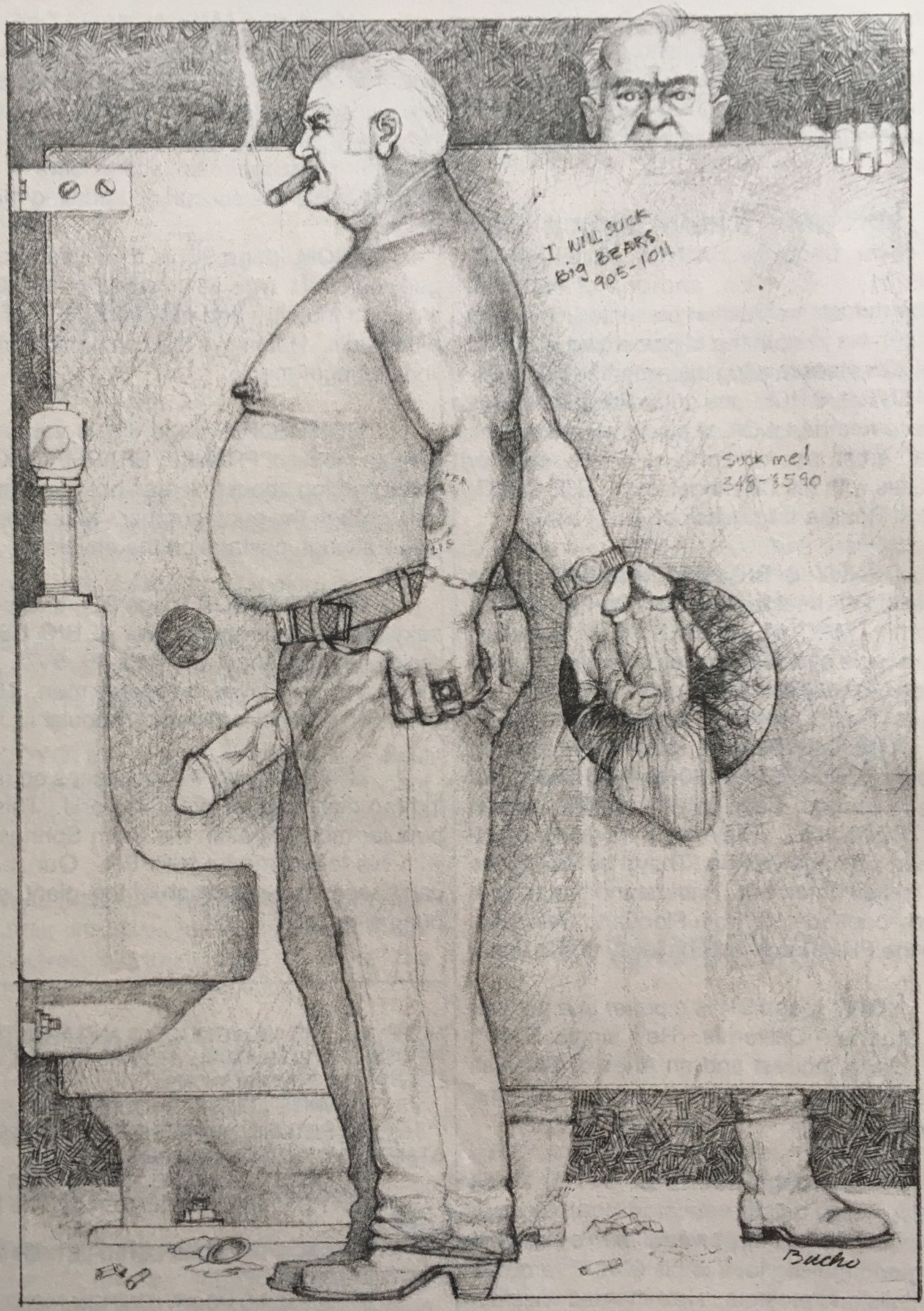
TIGHTROPE (page 89) is yet another Belgian model of FRANKIE BEARMANIAC. We know nothing about this man but you can write him through the photographer. Make sure you place enough postage on the envelope.

URSUS MINOR (page 92), a lusciously sexy, pro-wrestler-built lover of BIG BEARS, resides in Los Angeles. He's 46, 5'-7", 230#, fun-loving and loves heavyset men, 45 and older. This model is incredibly popular in Japan.

ZIPPER (page 94) just keeps on receiving fan mail from all over the world. This very popular model lives in the Palm Springs area with his lover, model NIPPER. Our readers can't seem to get enough of this giant, superhung silverback.

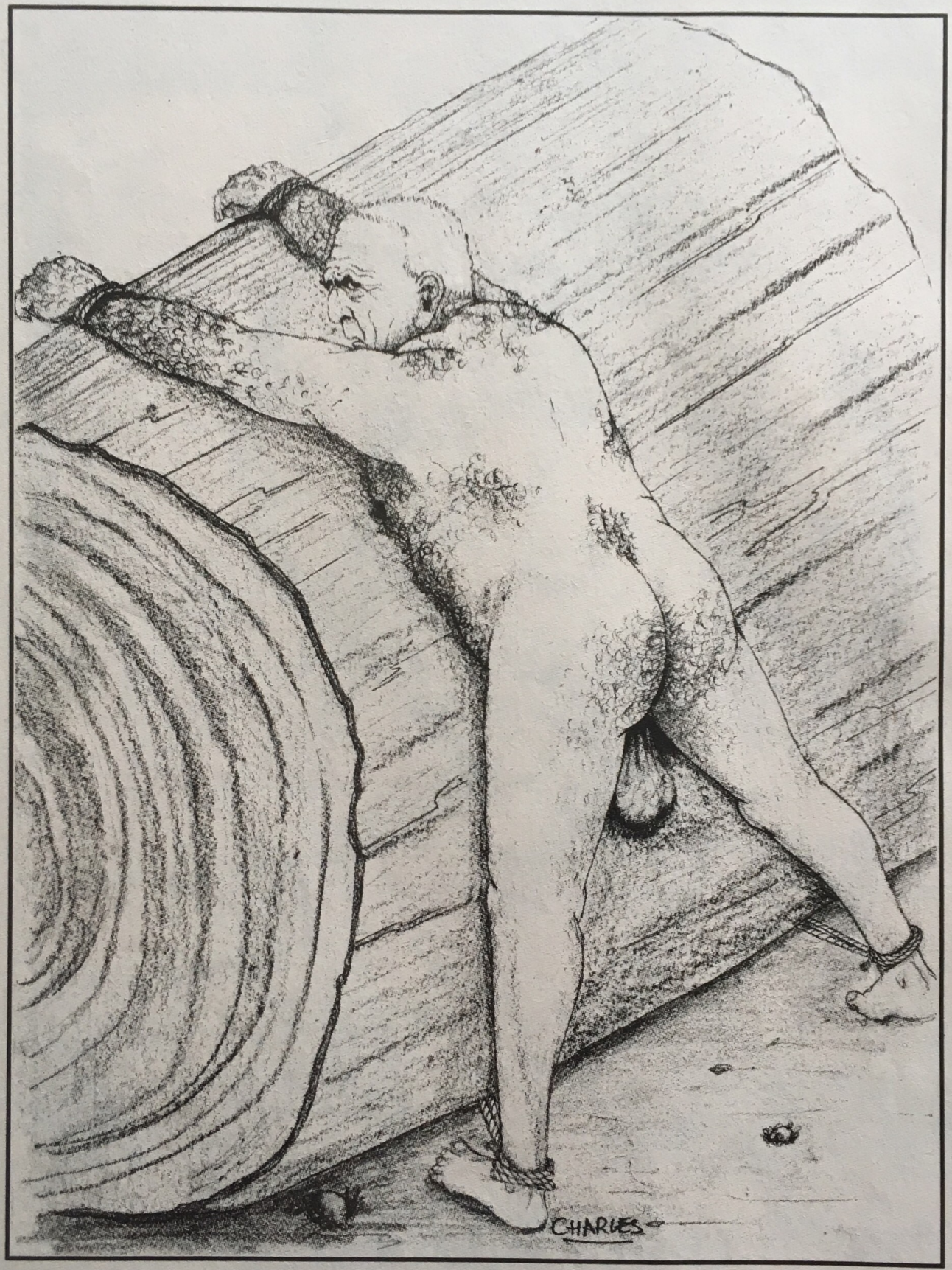
NOTE: ALL THE ABOVE MODELS AND ARTISTS MAY BE CONTACTED BY MAIL. PLEASE CLOSELY FOLLOW THESE INSTRUCTIONS:

1. WRITE AND SEAL YOUR LETTER.
2. RETURN ADDRESS THE LETTER AND STAMP IT WITH REQUIRED POSTAGE.
3. WRITE THE MODEL OR ARTIST'S NAME LIGHTLY IN PENCIL IN THE CENTER OF THE ENVELOPE.
4. PLACE THE COMPLETED LETTER INSIDE ANOTHER ENVELOPE.
5. MAIL IT TO US AT: CHIRON RISING, P.O. BOX 2589, VICTORVILLE, CA 92393.

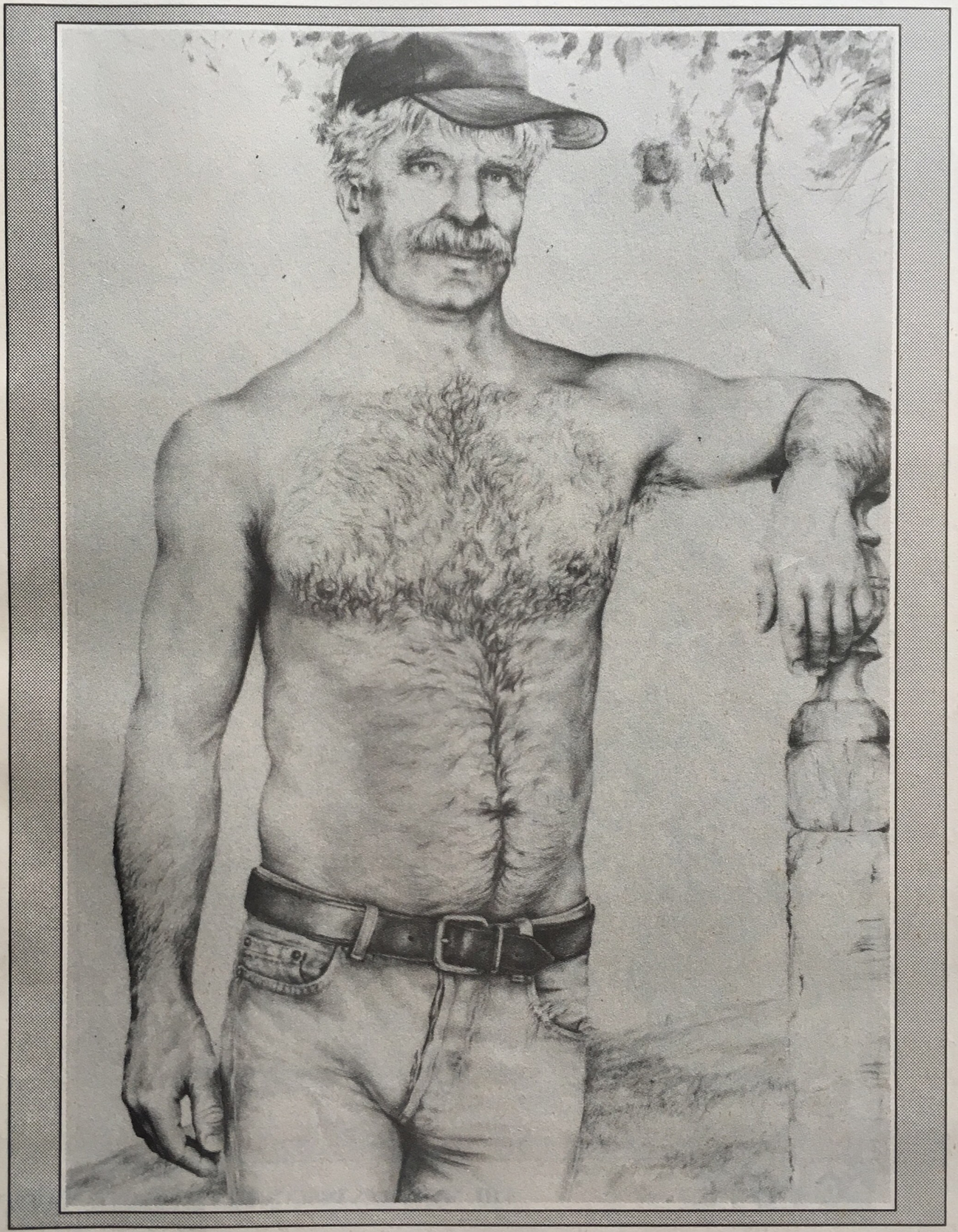


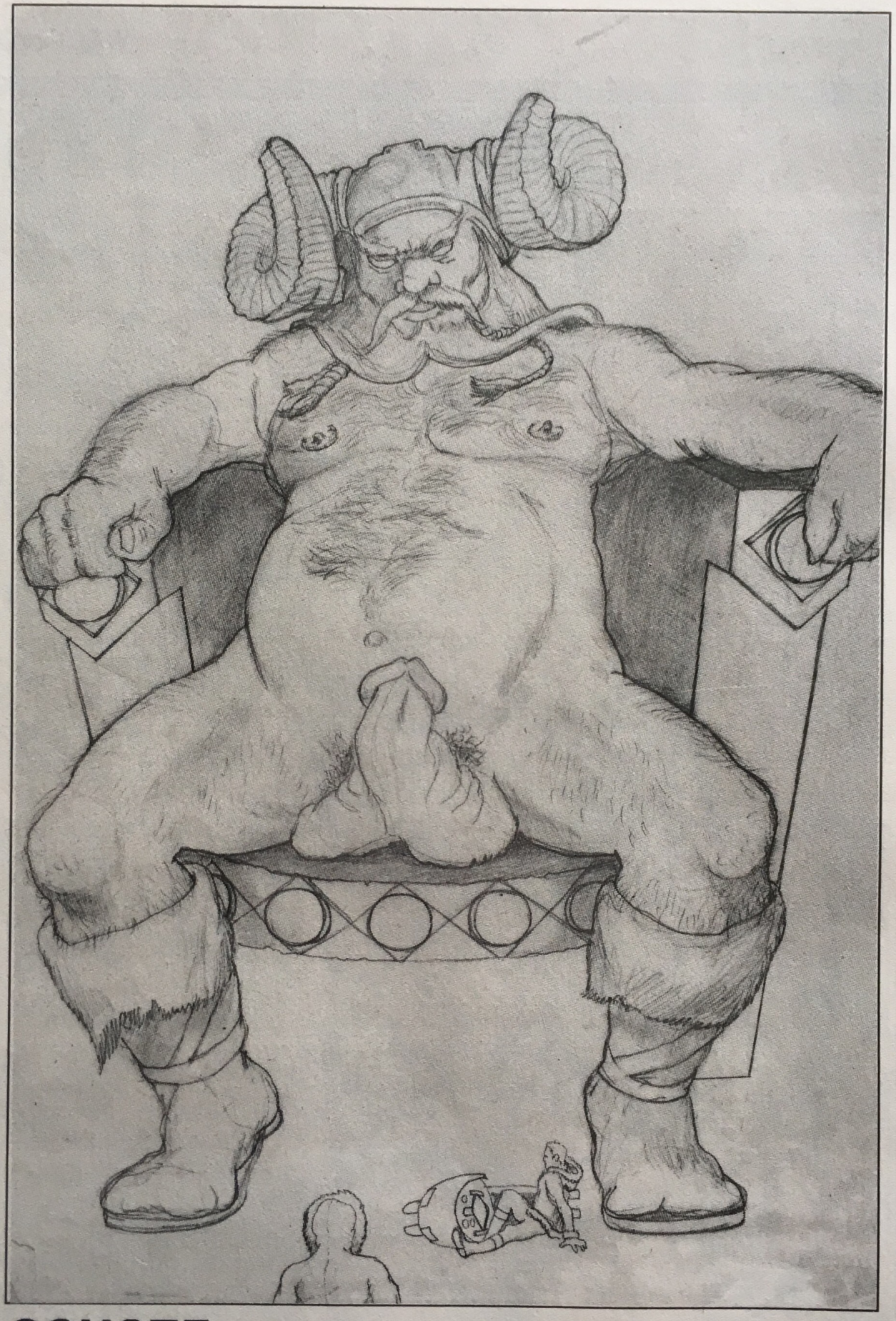
Piss Stop

Daily ritual



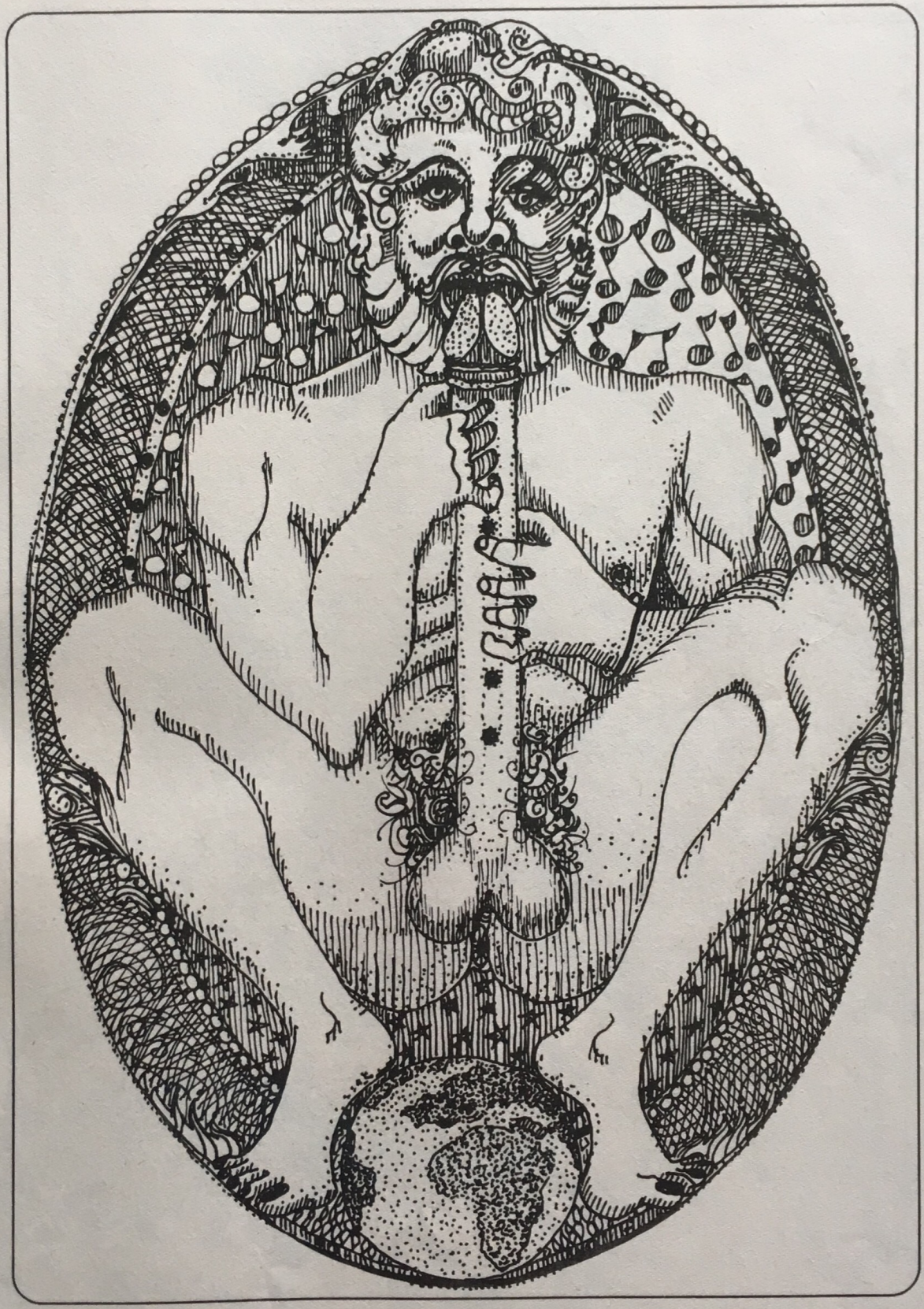
BAD DAY FOR THE LUMBERJACK





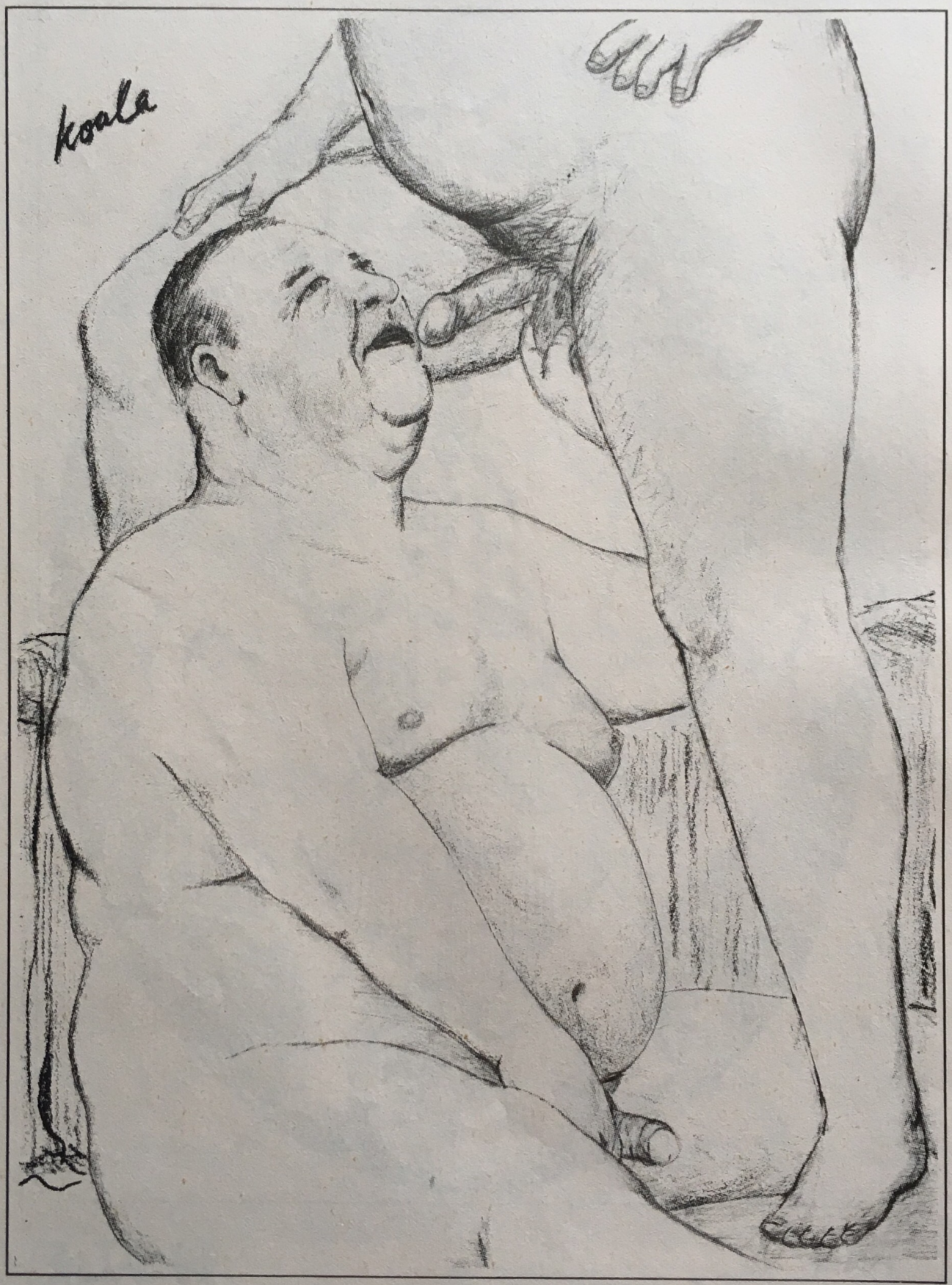
COYOTE

THE MORTALS DISCOVER THE GIANT, "ODIN."

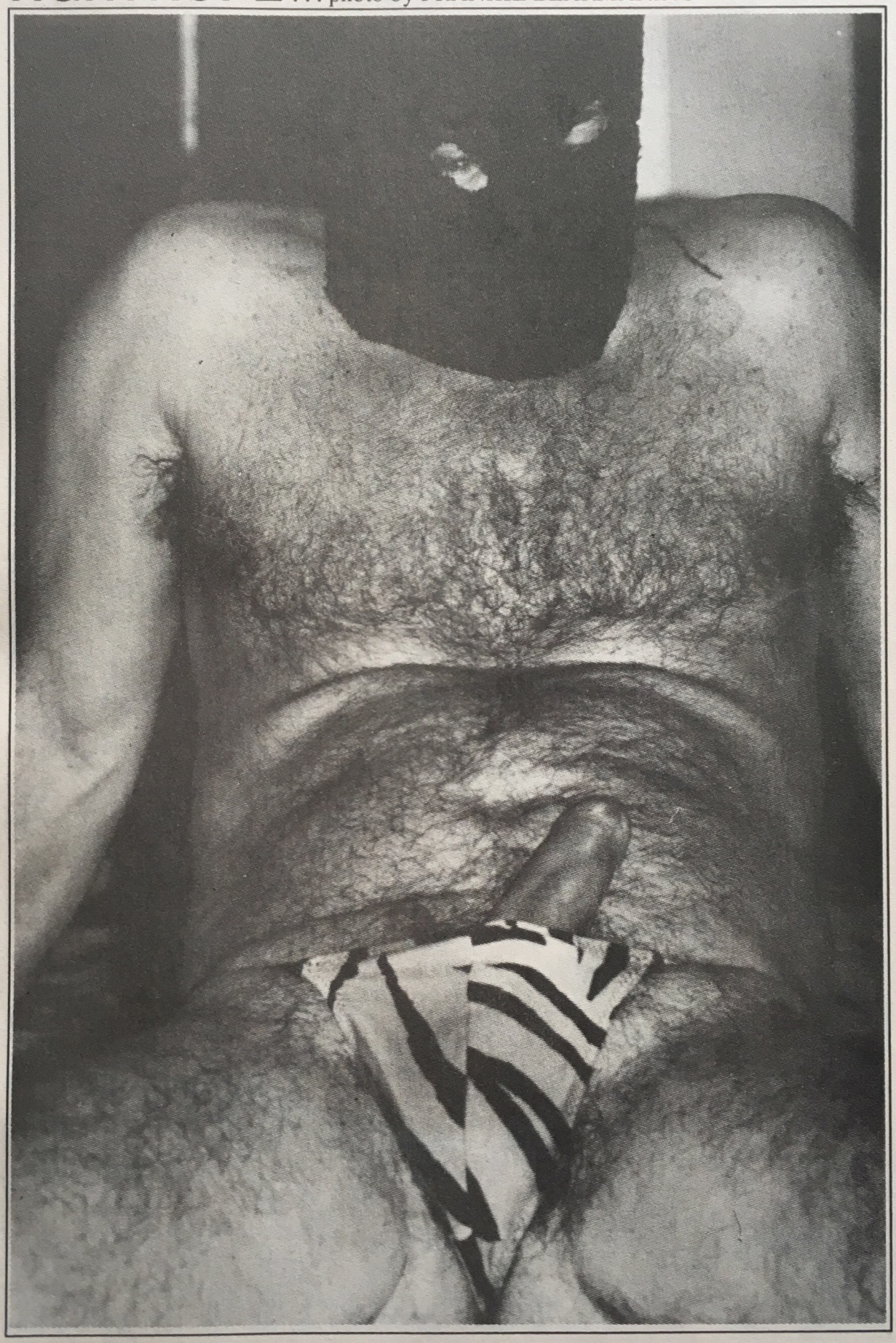


PAN

WOLF


koala

TIGHTROPE . . . photo by FRANKIE BEARMANIAC



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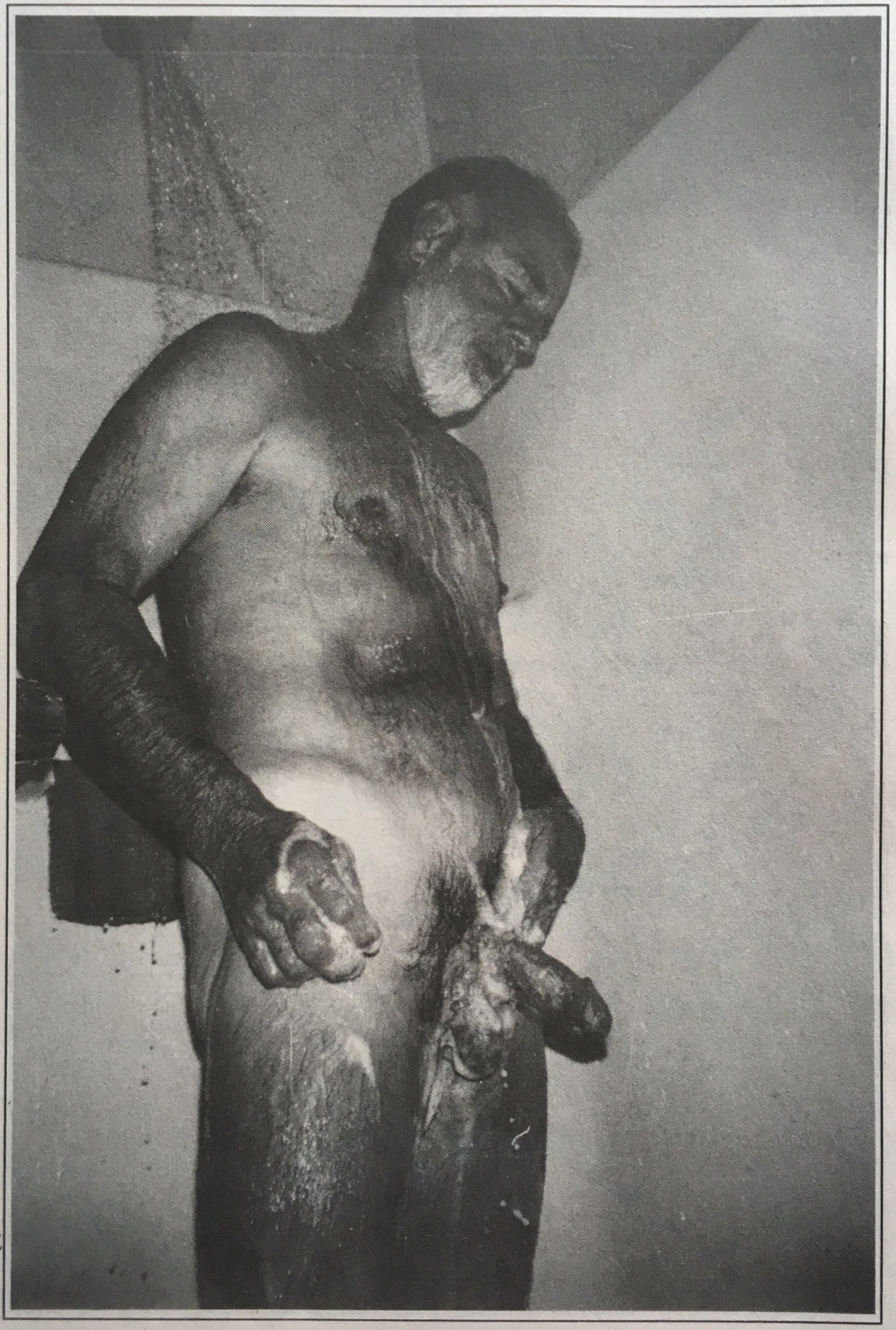


PHOTO
BY
KENT
JUSTICE

KORV

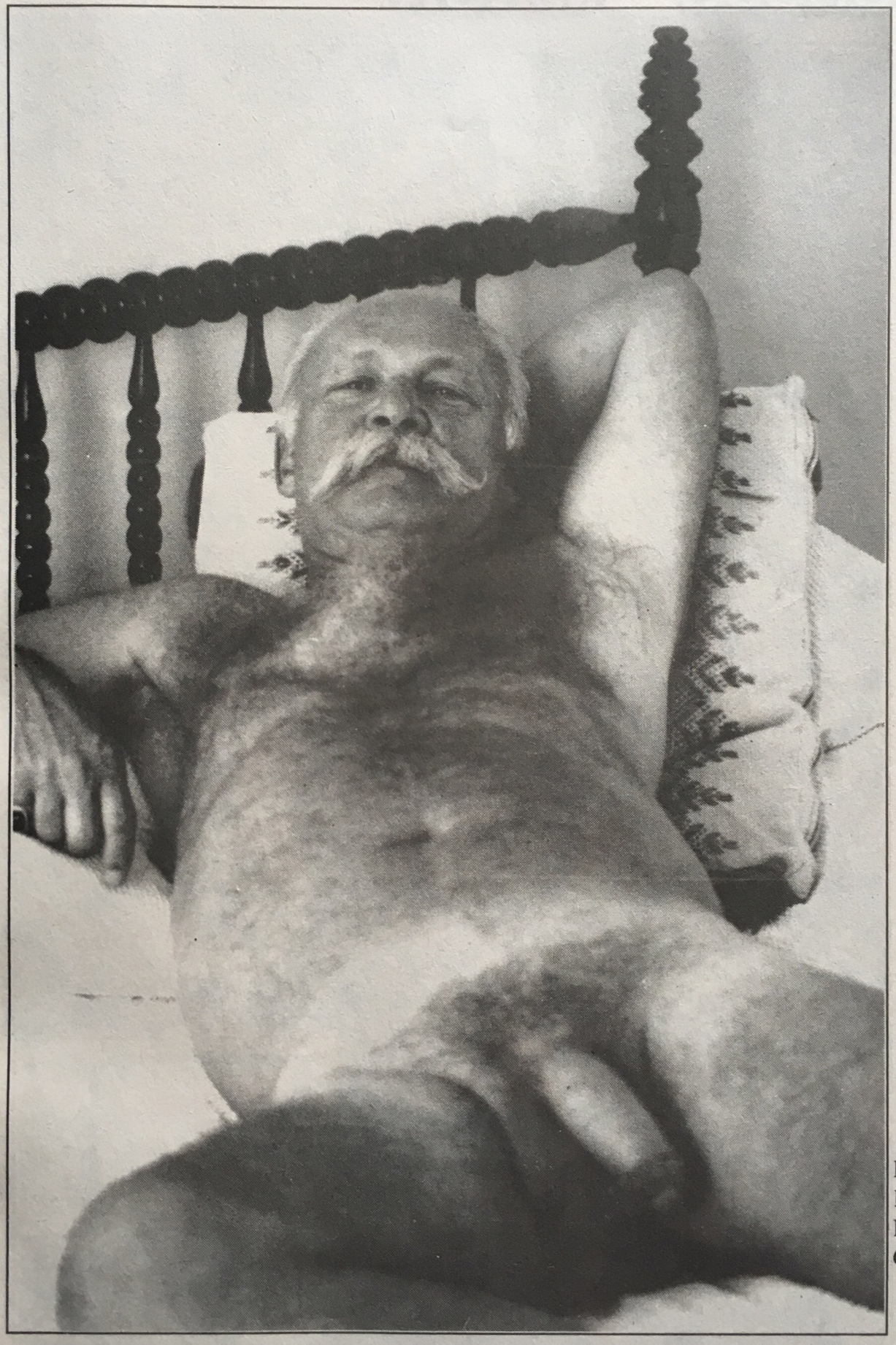


PHOTO BY P.H. COLLEY

URSUS MINOR

PHOTO BY AARON

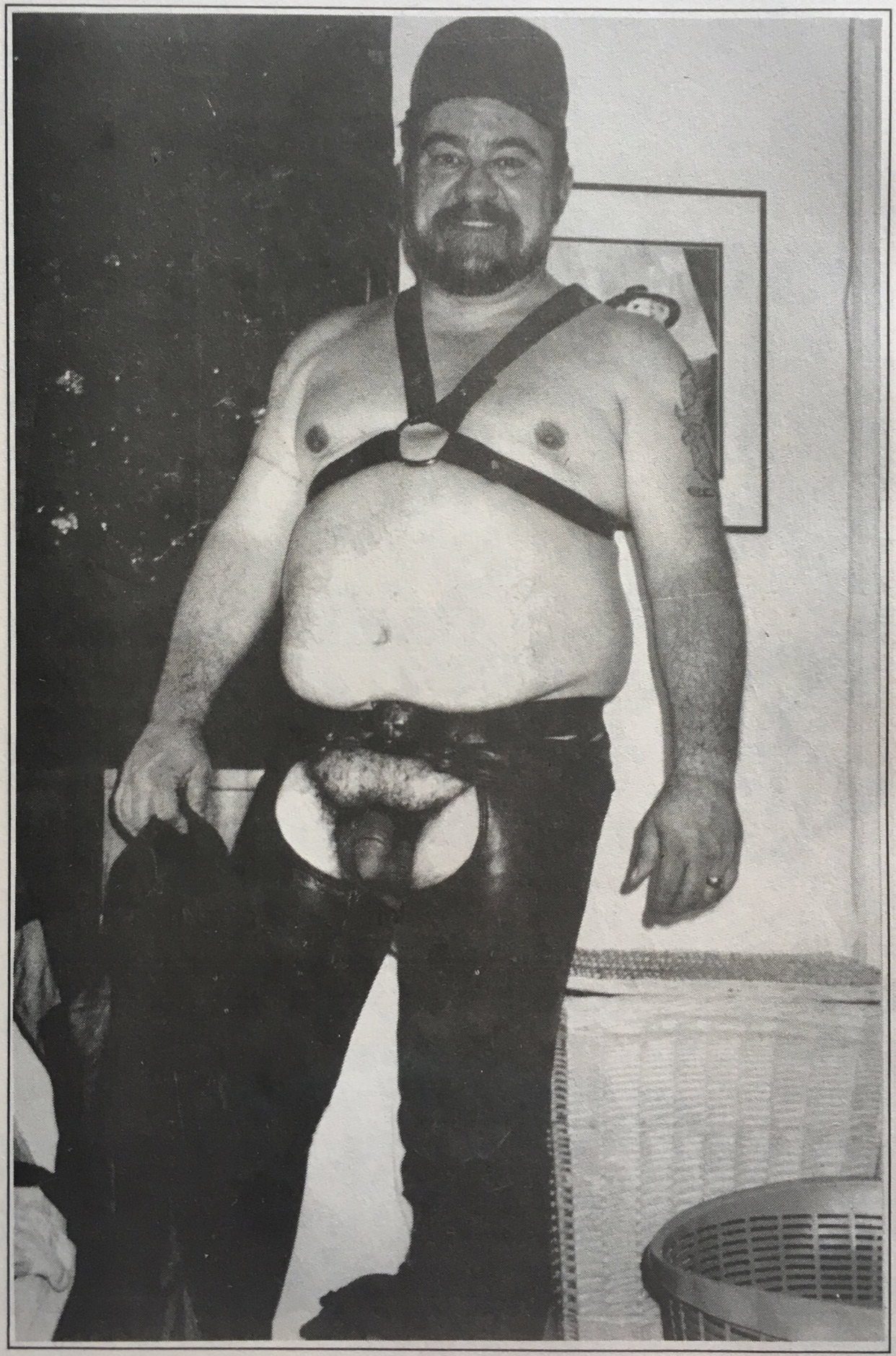


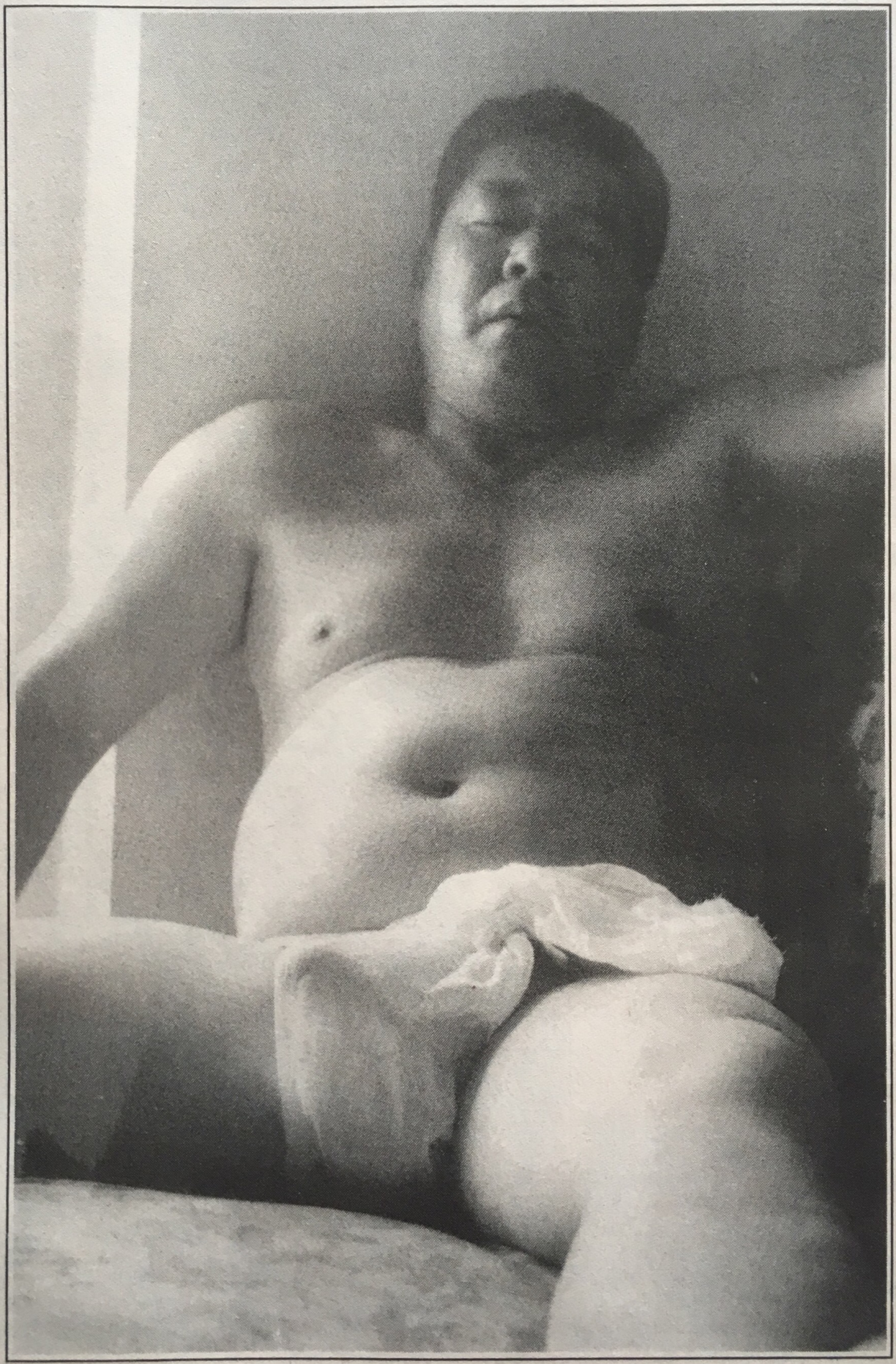
PHOTO
BY
P.H.
COLLEY

MACK

ZZZZZZZZIPPER

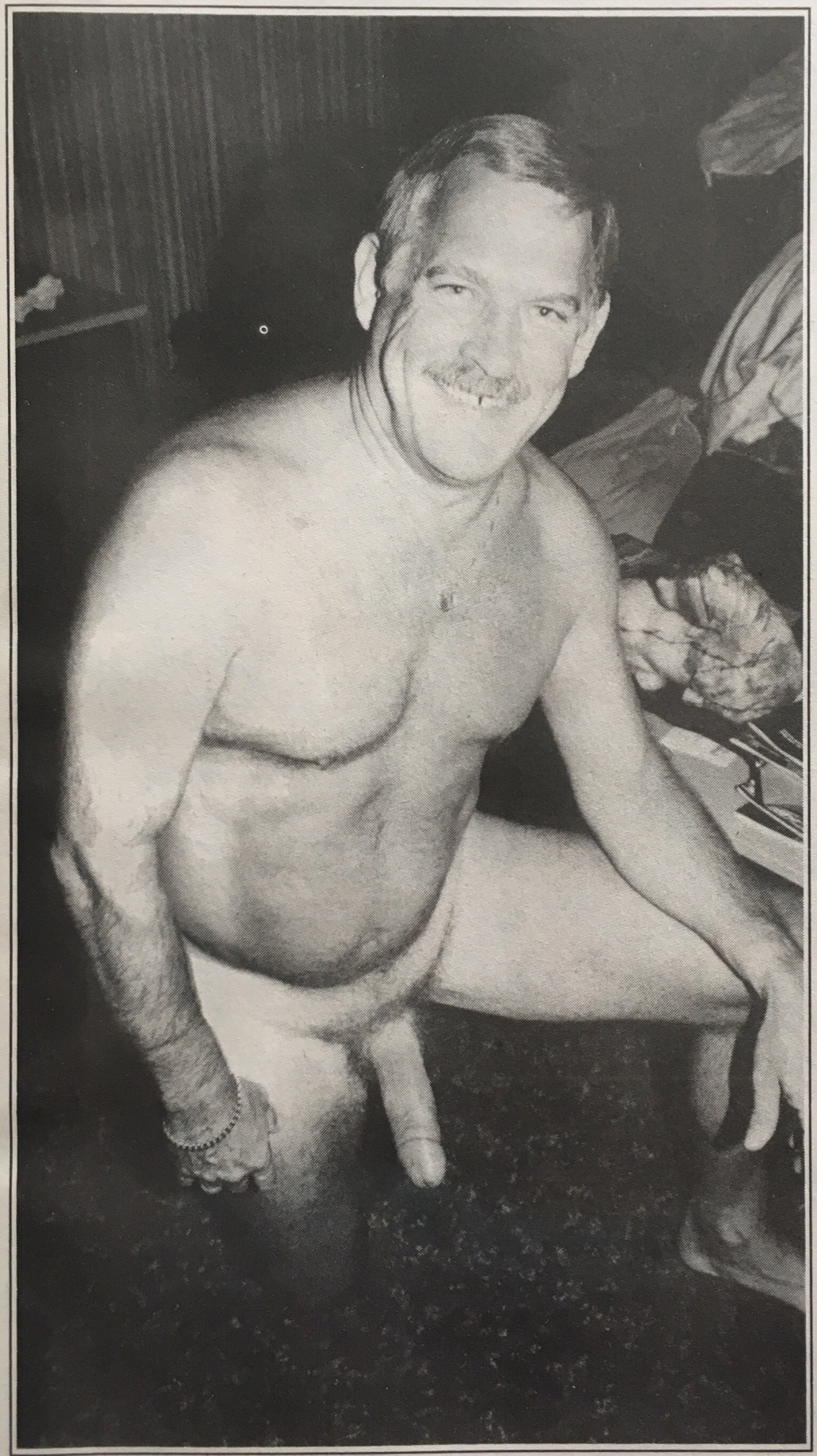
PHOTO BY P.H. COLLEY

MISTER "X" OF SAMSON



DENNY AND BIG MAC

photo by
P.H. Colley



BAMA

PHOTO BY FRED

THOM

PHOTO BY KENT JUSTICE

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伍志